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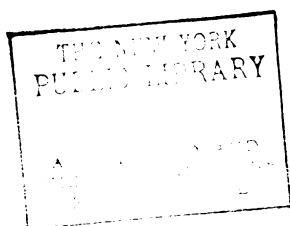
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BLIND SIGHT

**"THE TRUEST WAY TO LOVE ANOTHER IS TO
DESPISE OURSELVES."—From *Religio Medici***

SIR THOMAS BROWNE



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"IT'S A MAN," HE SAID; UNCONSCIOUSLY SPEAKING SOFTLY
AS ONE MIGHT COAX A CHILD

BLIND SIGHT

BY

B. Y. BENEDIALL

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GEORGE GIBBS

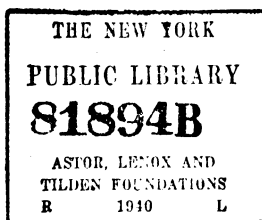


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BLIND SIGHT

CHAPTER I

THE TOUCH

JOEL watched the dancers from the corner of the doorway, feeling exceedingly amused, but rather uncomfortable in his unusual clothes. Having been trained for a Quaker as a boy, and developed Radical theories in himself during all the eight years since he came of age, he found the Nutons' guests a revelation that touched up his humour. Which proves that, whether he recognised it or not, his Socialism was passing out of the sardonically indignant stage, and becoming reasonable. He was inwardly laughing, not sneering.

Presently he would dance, as a part of his role, also for relish of the experience. For this was quite unlike the fun of the half-crown subscription "balls" at Haverstock Hill, and Camden Town, to which he had occasionally treated himself.

It was by the merest chance that he was staying at Norbys Priory. He was acting as detective's assistant, in the shoes of a club acquaintance, guarding Gwendolen Nuton's wedding presents. Probably people wondered where on earth her brother

Vincent had picked him up, for though he posed as friend of the family, he looked, he was convinced, the rankest outsider. Old Nuton introduced him either as "a promising novelist — not published yet, but soon will be —" or, "a smart young press man — strictly anonymous." Joel was really clerk at a wholesale ironmongery establishment in White-chapel; still he *had* written for papers, and meant to become known as a maker of fiction.

Leadley Brothers, who employed him, were uncles to Ransom Leadley, the most costly detective-agency man in London, so, when young Rivers had fallen ill, and suggested Joel Hunter as a fit person for his job, in association with the Hon. Sydney Crone and a graybeard named Smith, the required leave of absence had been willingly given. Joel had sampled but one day's residence at the Priory, but the holiday mood was on him that turns minor disagreeables into jokes, and he was fascinated by the social pictures he was contemplating.

A lamentable incident had occurred during the previous week's house-party; a solid gold powder-box had disappeared. On the eve of the amateur detective's arrival a worse evil had been perpetrated; a magnificent pearl, in a pendant, had been somehow replaced by a sham. Of course the jewelry was shut in a safe, except while on show to friends,

and Palley, the butler, was positive that none of the servants had gone near the room.

No — hirelings were not suspected. Joel had just learnt that the Nutons regarded two-thirds of the fashionable women, and about half the men, among their guests, as capable of theft. With all his disdain for the smart mob he had not hitherto divined that common burglary might be expected from so many of its members. He guessed now that the idea was exaggerated, yet, unless the second footman, Lines, who had a sly smirk, was culprit, it did seem probable that the thief belonged to a lofty class.

The naturalness of this scene made it comic. Things happened here that he had thought incidents only to be witnessed at half-crown dances. Several young women, all of the aristocracy, had become amazingly dishevelled, one was doing up her hair behind a palm, and her mouth was bristling with pins; the laughter of a duke's daughter was a bellow and a choke that broke through the music at intervals; the member for Abbeyvalley had been caught kissing Janie Ebontrot, of the "halls"; a Cabinet Minister was even now surreptitiously stuffing forced fruits in the supper-room. A vulgar-looking youth, whose hands were seldom out of his pockets, owned a classic title.

Joel was marvelling how Gwendolen Nuton could wear that self-satisfied smile when about to wed her first cousin, Bob, Lord Ebbingstone, whose rickety form, and pimple-covered face, disgusted the critic. It was a relief to glance at certain great folk who might have stepped out of earlier times, and had imbued their sons and daughters with something of their fastidiousness, at an actress of undying charm, an old scientist whose hobby was rose-growing, and some American brides who wore outrageous garments with invincible elegance.

Joel began to search the crowd for the *debutante* of no consequence he had taken in to dinner, or the breezy Mrs. Langham who had made him talk about his literary ambitions. Either might do to dance with. The latter was smartly alluring; the former appealed to innate brotherliness that had never found sufficient scope in sister Clara. Then something happened that prevented his remaining a rank outsider. Love confers many kinds of dignities; some can only be worn with suffering.

The pink corridor behind him had been empty; it led to the heart of the house. Now a tall girl was coming down it. He had not seen her before. At first he imagined she was part of the foolishness in some way — a species of mummer — because she wore a domino-shaped shade over her eyes; then he

remembered there was an elder daughter of the family who was now blind.

Her movements had plenty of decision till she reached within a yard of the doorway, then she threw back her head, and stood listening intently, a warm, beautiful statue, with a happy smile. Perhaps it was the seeming contradiction of that smile that drew Joel's heart to her first, in a great gush of pity. He had time to see that her white gown was embroidered lavishly with garlands of lemon roses, also that her brown hair, dressed in a couple of big waves, and her neck, arms, and face, were all rich-hued, full of life. Then she moved again, quickly. One ungloved hand, going out to find the door's side, passed over his coat-sleeve and rested on the edge of his white waist-coat.

For a second she looked perplexed, but before he spoke, and took the hand, the fingers had run up the stiff linen and lingered an instant against the neck above the collar.

"It's a man," he said; unconsciously speaking softly as one might coax a child. "I'm here to look after your sister's treasures, posing as a guest, you know. Can I take you anywhere?"

Ursula was struck by the blunt baritone; the voice had none of the affectations, put-on cadences, accents, lisps, and bravados, to which she was ac-

customed. The sleeve her hand was on now was without a satiny surface, had old creases in it, and she noticed an odour of most ordinary tobacco, instead of a mingle of hair lotions, scents, and face-washes.

Thoughts often came to her in flashes of wit. She could not help giving a contented laugh as she asked herself how many of her habitual associates could have honestly explained to her questioning fingers, "It's a man." Then there was another flash, rebuking her censoriousness, reminding her that though Bob's acquaintances were ultra smart, and slangy, Bob himself was always very cordial to her, and must, of course, have grown up satisfactorily while abroad, or Gwen would not be in love with him.

"Father told me about a Mr. Hunter who was coming in place of a pal. That is you?"

It was delightful that she spoke easily, as to an equal, that her hand rested where he had put it.

"Yes. It's a grinding anxiety when I'm on duty, for fear I blunder, not being trained. But I've another hour off."

She moved nearer, turning her sightless face to the ball-room.

"You are literary. If my dear chum and companion, Madame de Vert, were not away you should be introduced — she would be interested. She has gone to Cambridge to spend some weeks with her

son, Stephen, or I shouldn't be mistaking waistcoats for doorways. Did I startle you? No — you must have seen my shade. The doctors have been trying again to suit me with false eyelids, but I revolted finally to-night. I felt they were hideous, as all pretences must be."

"Your closed domino is better," said Joel, still sotto-voce.

Ursula nodded.

"And it's so striking that it is useful, warns people out of my blundering way, inspires lots of kind souls to help me. Will you tell me how my sister looks? She is over in the right-hand alcove, isn't she?"

"Yes, smiling across at you."

"That means she approves my dress, which had to be a bit elaborate in honour of her special dance; three girls of the village have been six months embroidering all those roses."

"You prefer that kind of costliness?"

"How well you jump to conclusions. But you haven't described Gwendolen."

Joel dared to be frank.

"Before you came down I was comparing her to a crested Belgian canary, long, slim, with a fringe giving a rakish air out of harmony with the figure. If her black locks rolled away from the brow she

would be awe-inspiring; now there's an indolence of gesture, and . . . and finish, that suggests she likes to let herself go, accept the broadest route, the easiest standard, comfortably expecting as little of other people."

He meant to excuse the choice of Lord Ebbingstone as a fiancé.

"Yes, Gwendolen is lenient, and a most popular person. Still, she has a foundation of pride."

The words, "And ambition, no doubt," were on the verge of the blunt man's tongue, but he luckily did not utter them.

He knew that Cousin Bob possessed an astounding number of acres, mostly adjoining the estate of Norbys Priory, but no money on which to maintain the family credit. His father's sister, on marrying Mr. Nuton, had taken a large fortune with her, where it certainly was not wanted. The obviously right thing was for a Nuton daughter to marry Bob and take it back again. Ursula's blindness had come in time to save her from refusing. Gwendolen was twenty-six, her junior by a year. Bob was but twenty-three.

"I haven't offended you?" asked Joel anxiously.

"Not at all. You drew the picture of a lovable character, when I had only expected a fashion-plate sort of description."

"I think she wants you."

As he spoke a shrill whistle came, in a pause of the music. When he had taken Ursula across the floor he returned to the doorway, no longer bent on finding Mrs. Langham or the débutante.

Of course, the sisters were discussing him.

"You gave the journalist-ironmonger so much encouragement that I wouldn't leave you to turn his head any more, Ursie."

"He is nice."

"Poor wretch! This must be a soothing isthmus between Whitechapel and the region of Chalk Farm. Child, you love dancin'. Why haven't . . ."

"No, no — men would only pilot me out of charity — except Bob, and he has forgotten. I'd rather not, unless — Yes, I'll ask Mr. Hunter. Before you go and waltz signal him up, there's a dear — and give me some idea of what he is like to look at."

A clever definition was not to be hoped for from Gwen the careless; still she made an effort, knowing the blind girl's eagerness for seeing through others' eyes.

"Lean, muscular, pale, with a scrubby brown moustache, and an obstinate jaw."

Joel lost no time in obeying the beckon. Ursula smiled.

"Father said you are a dancing man . . ." she was beginning, when her meaning was anticipated.

"You'd really not mind? How awfully good of you."

"Take care of her," warned Gwendolen, as she moved away.

They were extraordinarily happy together, both knowing so. The beauty he had come so near was of a type he had not held close before, the companionship of this mind was a call to his mind at its best, and he would have given his life gladly, even then, to minister to the consolation of this sightless woman. He told her what the room appeared, in contrast with the February starshine outside and the frosty mist over the park land. He let her laugh with him at the oddest toilettes, and his tongue, which could be caustic, knew no fear, so convinced was he that when she asked questions she desired sincerity. Yet, with inconsistency, he gave her an utterly false version of his own view of her future brother-in-law.

Dancing, the protective grasp, the sound and the commonsense of his rapid sentences, were keener comforts to her than he guessed, though he saw that she was exhilarated and grateful. . . . She, this young goddess! . . . To him, the outsider!

They walked on the terrace, in the dark, after he had wrapped her in a long blue cloak that he told

her was fit for Romola. When he went back to his post by the wedding-presents he knew she was soon coming to be "shown" them again, by a person who could make them seem real. Mr. Nuton and Vincent, his son, had been on guard, exhibiting the valuables to relay after relay of guests; now the doors were to be closed against the mob; the Hon. Sydney Crone was still to shine in the ball-room, but Smith, the graybeard, would share Joel's vigil.

If that veteran was amused by the conversation that went on presently over the jewels, miniatures, carvings and curios, he preserved a stolid countenance, and neither Joel nor Ursula heeded his being there. The journalist waxed eloquent, on the mysteries of the birth of gems deep within earth, the poesy of pearl colouring, the legends of all the stones, from a landscape-agate in a belt-buckle, up to the great yellow diamond that had come to be an Ebbingstone hair ornament long, long ago, when a younger son had turned heretic for love of a Hindoo girl.

The most renowned trinket was the necklace of oval rubies.

"Aren't they a very gorgeous spectacle?" asked Ursula.

He laughed, as he clasped the rope for a second round her neck.

“Magnificent, but they don’t suit you. They might be made of the heart’s blood of crafty conquerors, not of any honest man.”

CHAPTER II

A DIPLOMATIC CAUTION

THE jewels were locked up, but the other gifts, many of them portable, lay about or hung on screens. There was quiet in the house at last, after the monotonous clatter of voices and the coming and going of cars and carriages; such a stillness that Joel thought the early morning must be thankful. Aurora always steals forth shyly when she can.

Smith sat, unwinking, against the corner of the table where silver-plate that had come without cases was spread out.

"Affable, the bridegroom as is to be," he said. "Brought me three glasses of prime champagne, some dry, or '*sec*' I should say, some sweet, to see which I fancied."

"Yes, civil enough."

The remark had disturbed a train of thought that was carrying Joel's memory to a place he fervently wished he had never visited, the landlady's office of the Victory Inn, Merrow Street, Chalk Farm.

"A matter which nine young sparks out of ten wouldn't have troubled over."

Joel let this statement pass, and returned to his recollections of Patty. Smith got out a revolver from a drawer, also a huge alarm bell. That did rouse his unpractised assistant.

"Good heavens, you don't actually expect an attack, do you? I was feeling a ludicrous figure-head."

"Who knows? It isn't likely they'll try to rush us, but it's been done before now. Most things have — that's my theory."

Enlightenment broadened Joel's smile. The revolver was partly defence against him, the unknown, who was lounging on the edge of the side table that bore a collection of rare Japanese prints destined for Gwendolen's boudoir. After all, Smith was not absurd, not being acquainted with Leadley Brothers' confidence in their clerk. But the suspicion set Joel pacing up and down the tremendous room, far from the property, his hands linked behind his back, his heavy eyebrows rather lower and more contracted than usual.

Something had happened to-night that had put his very respectable life out of focus, left the past in a most unpleasant blur. Patty's kisses, relished as an exciting novelty at last meeting, had lost all savour in remembrance, her vehemence had become disgraceful, his responsive mood, his light laughter, somehow

corrupting. Yet he admitted to himself that, if Patty had not been a pure-intentioned woman all the years they had played with fire, their mutual position by now would be different. Her coldness — which was merely prudence, or virtue — had annoyed him so at moments that he would have brushed it aside without the least immediate remorse. This in defiance of a Quaker education in malleable boyhood, and the blamelessness of his moral record as the tame, home-keeping son of a splendid mother. The kisses established no claim at all; he was as free as air, legally, or indebtedly. As for sentiment — ?

That was a hard nut to crack. He both respected Patty, in a fashion, and felt tenderly towards her, as a man can who goes on wooing a social inferior without compromising himself, an enemy to the notion of vice, yet vexed, at moments, by the woman's unyieldingness. They had both practised shrewd circumsppection, and been alternately drawn and repulsed, by that cautiousness in the other. The kisses had surely marked a crisis? He had wondered how she would greet him next, in the parlour-office where she sat up so late reckoning accounts. He had imagined that platonics would prove impossible.

Gray drudgery, a passionate demand for something livelier than the routine the years had made

sickening, the rebellion that comes when a man realises his being crippled by a heavy yoke of duty, the need for romance as well as for the satisfaction of the mere animal, the flesh that lusteth against the spirit, had combined of late to weaken principles. He had asked himself more and more frequently what harm it would do any one if he took for his own this woman he could not marry during his mother's lifetime? No argument, or persuasion, would avail to induce Mrs. Hunter to live peaceably in the same house with Patty, nor console her for losing him from home; she would incessantly fret if she knew she was such a cost that he could not maintain a wife elsewhere, yet their association would be disastrous, for Patty's temper, as for hers.—Yes, Patty was low — audacious, tricky, a bit unscrupulous, except in her love affair; slangy, somehow tarred. He might belong to her, without any one's knowing, since she was both lonely and fond. He could never distress his mother. Patty probably understood that, weighed his difficulties accurately. And the kisses had surely demonstrated the increase in fondness that . . . ?

But there was religious blood in Joel; so, though he had let himself play with fire that he guessed must burn him, and had wondered how wrong this unblessed union would be, he had never definitely decided upon

it. Of course advance decisions are seldom necessary.

Pacing the study of Norbys Priory, fuming against the shuttered state of the windows and at Smith's distrust, worried because Patty must be cold-shouldered, conscious that he had behaved cad-dishly, forced to part with a once alluring prospect, aware that there was nothing but a clean feel to be gained by the sacrifice, Joel came nearer to red-hot socialism than in all his raw theorisings. Why wasn't he as good as anybody? Why was contact with leisured, moneyed, cultured folk only his for a week? A personal grievance is such a convincing plea for wishing to smash superiority.

Ursula had taught him that his own woman must be refined. Undoubtedly he might discover plenty to choose from who were not aristocrats, one, at last, possibly, who could share home with his mother and Clara; yet the connection with those two with the sordid ugliness of the household routine would spoil the rapture. What a marriage! A fortnight at the lakes, and then meals with his relatives, evening hours in the one parlour, nights in the best bedroom vacated regretfully by mother, with the street noises ending late and beginning early, the policeman's hollow cough, the cheeky paper-boy's yelp, the milk-cart driver's blatant whistle. And for even that de-

gree of bliss what sieges to be entered upon, what diplomacy to be pursued, what coaxings to be practised. Mother must like the girl, tolerate her style of dress, believe her willing to be "a good house-keeper"—then the laying down of the reins of government, the terribly smiling, inwardly bitter, relinquishment of authority, and the keys!

Joel knew he would rather live unwed. The little, loving, tiresome hands of his mother had, all unconsciously, bound him fast, denied him his man's rights. He could not pursue happiness at her expense. He would not be happy with a wife under mother's roof, that he paid for. The tragic, for many men, is made of sentiments too delicate to be interfered with.

Also, deep down in his soul, was a foolish aversion to all the nice, refined young women he might possibly court and wed. Patty had roused what he called the devil in him; for gentle middle-class amenities of daily domesticity he had no craving. He seemed to want either a rather vulgar companion, or an existence on the purest, fairest heights, with a goddess.

"You'll wear a track in the Indian carpet, to say nothing of the waste of shoe-leather."

Joel turned on Smith fiercely, then laughed at the angry impulse. "You can't meditate sleep, with me to watch, you know."

No retort followed, for Bick and Lick, the Aberdeen terriers, were racing along the marble hall, giving forth subdued yelps of ecstasy.

"Open, please," said Vincent Nuton's silky voice. Joel let him in, receiving a nod of thanks.

Ursula's brother was a type for which Joel entertained approval, cool, well-mannered, too cute to be called languid, apparently simple in tastes, by reputation a student of history and author of several scholarly brochures on disputed points in the love affairs of French kings. Rather bloodless, with a detached sort of expression, he had played host admirably, as agreeably aiding his widower father as he was now offering cigars that were true compliments to the men in charge of his sister's presents. His fawn-coloured camels'-hair dressing-gown matched his thinning curls. "You're tired, Smith; go upstairs for a sleep. I have come to relieve your watch."

"Why, you must be more fatigued, sir, seeing as how ——"

"If you please."

A wave of the effeminate white hand to the door, a courteous nod of dismissal, effected their purpose, reluctant though the head detective was to leave his job.

"The revolver's loaded, sir," were the greybeard's parting words.

"Worthy old fool," was Vincent's comment, as he took a lounge chair by the window, turning his back to the tables, leaving them, and the weapon, close by Joel. "I've been talking to Sydney Crone; now I've a couple of sentences to bore you with on the business subject, Hunter."

"You've known Mr. Crone years, I conclude?"

"Yes. Have you any ideas at all yet about who got at the pearl pendant? Any ideas, mind, founded on straw, possibly?"

"Your second footman, Lines, shakes like a jelly-fish when spoken to sharply."

"He may be a tool. My second sentence is just this, don't let us lose our heads — any of us — if a crisis comes; for, in all probability, hushing up may be of more consequence than the loss, or even than the credit of Ransom Leadley."

Joel came over to stand before the speaker, and stare curiously in his face.

"Why?"

Vincent met the look without flinching.

"Scandals are best scamped. Just bear it in mind. That's all. I've no more to say about business. Any judge of book-binding? What do you think of that edition of Saint-Beuve on the piano?"

For an hour the two men chatted of folios, modern taste, Wagner, first editions, and French associations

with the streets of London. Then Joel found himself invited to speak of his own life and prospects, explaining even that it was only by the exercise of the pen that he could hope to raise himself. Young Nuton was not in the least patronising; Joel's problem seemed to fascinate him, he would not let it drop, turned it into an argument on "What is worth while?"—revealed his own interior philosophy.

"We start at opposite ends of the stretched pole, Hunter, you and I. You've probably the 'persisting, untameable, efficacy of soul' that old John Foster, most neglected of early eighteenth century favourites, describes as giving dignity—a seductive dignity, to any character. You have to build with that tool, and no doubt can build high. I can but use my plateau rationally (pardon mixed metaphors), maintaining a decent footing, and maintenance is apt to pall."

"A pedestal place to shine from?"

"No, I should never trouble to shine. The old nobility of our country (Nutons are more antique than most of the nobles, and have linked themselves with all the principal families), needs to be proved level-headed, and unaspiring, not meteoric or in any sense glittering. Take this marriage we are preparing, as an object lesson. I hope my sister's son will make a better Ebbingstone than his father."

"Doesn't she see what the man is?" was Joel's abrupt question. Vincent evidently had no distaste for the rudeness of the catchism.

"She shares our wish to work a cure for family — he's a first cousin. His improvement can't be performed at a distance."

"A girl's being anxious to exert a sisterly influence on such a ——"

"A rotter?"

"A word I didn't like to use. But I can't see how she can bear being wife to him."

"My other sister would agree with you. However, we all concur in keeping Ursula happily in the dark about Bob, as on many other topics. Since she became blind, four years back, we try to manufacture sunlight for her inner life. She and Gwendolen are devoted, of course, but confidences are one-sided. You're right, Hunter, it is a bit ghastly for a girl to be tied to such a fool, but different women acknowledge different ambitions, and the certainty of our all being at her back, as it were, competent to help her carve the rotter's career for him, with power to check his evil by legitimate bribery, satisfies Gwen. It would vex her to lose him."

"That's scarcely to be dreaded, I imagine," sneered Joel, thinking of the money-bags.

"Riches, eh? — From the Ptolomies downwards,

so to the last effort of eugenic visionaries in the decline of humanity, money has lured, and will lure."

Vincent rose and began playing with the dogs at his feet. Then he unbarred one window, letting in the tingle of February air after dawn, finally opened the casement, and stepped out, saying,

"I have a confounded headache. Do you mind if I leave you?"

"Not an atom. Stay, though, are you positive the stuff's here all right now? Smith suspects me of having designs on it."

Vincent nodded soothingly.

"Don't bother. If some vanishes you are the last man I'll charge. My father shares my confidence, or I shouldn't have spoken my two sentences. You can bolt up after me if you're nervous. I shall go round the terrace and in by the door of the west wing. These rascals can come too."

Joel had no adventures, but the solitude and responsibility fretted him ridiculously, and he went tired to bed at nine o'clock, when the Hon. Sydney Crone, and Smith, arrived to defend the wedding-gifts from the house-party, or the gang of burglars.

CHAPTER III

IN THE DARK

It was waking to each new day that Ursula felt her blindness most. She could not share the general emerging from darkness of night and sleep. Of course she woke too — but not as others. The sunshine smote her very soul the morning after the dance. With a passionate gesture she stretched out both hands as though to thrust away the warmth that meant light; then, humbled by her weak resistance, plunged her face in the pillow and lay still.

She knew, though nobody else would have done, that the temperature was quite a degree and a half higher than at the same hour yesterday; a February's attempt at geniality is seldom recognised by those who can see a white rime lingering on trees and grass still in shadow, when flower borders are almost colourless, and yuccas stand swathed in canvas. Ursula was still a novice in the peculiar learning of the blind, yet touch had begun to thrill her as it cannot thrill those who are in possession of all their faculties. The sun's kiss from afar warmed her more than others. She could not sulk long with her

awakener, but, raising herself in bed, let the breeze from the wide, open, uncovered window blow away her miseries.

As the conspiracy on her family's part to shelter her from any more trouble was unknown to her, so was she unaware that she deceived those dear ones, all her friends in fact, in increasing degree as they were more beloved. When her soul seemed blind as her eyes she bore the torment silently, since to complain would, she thought, be wicked cowardice.

This was an extra hard waking, perhaps, for want of Armandine de Vert's vigorous greeting, or else in consequence of last night's dance having revolutionised her inner kingdom of resignation. For her, as for Joel, something had happened.

Armandine was an undemonstrative friend, but her plump brown hand was wont to rest on the pillow while she said, "Good-morning, Chick," and Ursula usually snuggled her cheek down on it. The vacancy now, when she touched the linen, added to her loneliness. Next she wondered what it must be to wake to the kiss of a person loved better than all others put together, and as responsively loving — but she had no idea that anybody could want to fill the place for her. On the contrary, she forced back all dreams of this class, with far better success than she struggled to resist the sun-warmth when it hurt her. A

blind woman is bound to remain mateless, unless she is borne with for her fortune.

She and Dina were thoroughly agreed upon this, as the outcome of discussions waged among favourite solitudes of the fragrant country; the decision had been couched again and again, in plain terms, by the protecting elder. Ursula would quietly promise never to be a fool.

"Don't be afraid for me. I shall not want to marry any individual man under the circumstances. I only vaguely long to be married — to have been a wife before this accident came to make it impossible."

"Dangerous state of mind. Get rid of it," Dina was sure to snap out, or suggest by other arguments.

"I should require a hero too wonderful to exist," the girl said once, "and being loyal enough to be eyes for me even in looking at him. Think of it! He would explain himself wholly to me; I couldn't read truth in his face, or notice if he was ashamed."

As soon as Ursula had been helped to dress she safely traversed corridors, stairs and hall, then paused just inside the breakfast-room while she guessed who was present.— None of the house-party, only father, Gwen and Vincent, surely?

"You can make any inhospitable speech you choose, Ursie."

Laughing, she felt along the table's edge, and slipped into her chair.

"One was nearly exploding, but the Duke is so abnormally still when behind a newspaper that I can never be sure of his absence. I suppose they're all asleep. How jolly it is to be just a family again; I'm rewarded for coming down. But you were all talking hard before I opened the door. What was the subject?"

Gwendolen and Vincent exchanged glances before the former answered,

"Bob, of course."

"Dear Bob.—What specially about him?"

"It's bein' a nuisance that he says business obliges his flight to town for a day or two."

"You shouldn't be unfair, Gwen; he is sure to be going to his tailor, and you have almost lived among shops and dressmakers."

A blind person's face is generally watched steadily; Ursula's was the study of all their eyes, as she managed her knife and fork, each Nuton viewing her sympathetically, and convinced that she must be extra cherished. Most mistaken kindnesses are attempts at legislating for others.

Vincent, intent on improving the race by the steadying of Cousin Bob, secretly clung to celibacy with a fervour exceeding that with which most men snatch at love. He had never said he would not be hampered by a wife, he really saw that he would some day immolate his peace; nor did he go about saying that he thought women poor creatures, either burdens, like a blind sister one had to plot for, or derogatory, and finally tiring, toys; but the opinions were in him. He quite rejoiced in the plan of uniting the estates for a future son of Gwen's — it would relieve him of so much responsibility in England. Vincent's father wanted the family made more important, whereas Vincent was content for it to remain undistinguished except for antiquity, and Gwen's son would join title to land. Vincent had avowed his intention of leading an almost recluse life on the Welsh estates, not meddling in diplomacy or politics, but writing about mistakes in the works of historians — this whether he condescended to wed, or shirked his obvious duty.

Gwendolen was the most ambitious Nuton of them all; she was determined to tolerate Bob for the sake of gathering earldom, estates and revenues together. And beneath her indolence lay the unwillingness, almost the incapability, of changing the purpose now it was so part and parcel of her. When she saw Bob

at his worst, or divined what that might be, she would shrug her shoulders and tell herself:

“There’s no other way.”

Her father and brother had nearly overshot the mark in coercing Bob of late. The young man had become rude, nearly defiant, indeed; once he had broken into a temper and declared that he’d put off the whole blasted affair if he wasn’t treated better. At present the wedding was fixed for February 29, which, as Gwen had remarked at the breakfast-table, was the one date she preferred to all others, because it would have so few anniversaries.

They had been debating what was to be done with Bob, to calm him down, without giving him money. All his debts, that cropped up like lawn daisies with the passing of a few hours, he brought to his purchaser-relatives, to be filed by them for payment directly after the marriage was a fact. His latest state of irritability meant that he was “somehow up a tree”; they knew that some claim he did not wish to divulge, and could not meet, was addling his none too reliable brain.

“Can’t you tell him that if it’s a woman she doesn’t matter an atom; make it easy for him?” Gwen had been asking, when Ursula’s entrance had stopped the conversation.

“I daresay Bob will get his tailors down here,

instead of goin' to them," she said. "Did you enjoy yourself last night, Ursie? You looked radiant."

"Tremendously. And I know such a lot more about your presents now. Mr. Hunter surrounded them with a kind of halo. He spoke of the intaglios so that I could see the artists poring over them, month after month, close under gas-jets in dim, dusty workshops, before windows giving upon narrow, picturesque alleys, where idlers lounged, rebuked by the ceaseless cut, cut, and saw, saw of the enthusiast's little tools. As for the mosaics, we went to Rome to understand those; to the schools first, where old masters of the craft try to keep pupils to the ancient painstaking methods, and so often. . . . But how I *am* holding forth!"

"Hunter's a straight chap," put in Vincent. "The kind of vagrant one would like to put upon his feet."

"Why vagrant?" asked Ursula quickly.

"A strayer from professional-class respectability. His father was a doctor in Devon, a man of some birth, who deviated himself from the sane path by taking to wife the Quaker lass of a Manchester suburb baker. Instead of insisting on being a doctor, too — a rung from which it's possible to mount, by either cuteness or matrimony — the son drifted into ironmongery."

"He writes."

"They all do — not ironmongers merely — the entire brigade of carelessly groomed intellectualists, humanitarians, would-be leaders of thought, who inhabit crushingly decent homes, and yearn in spotless bedrooms next their mother's. Poor devil, he would prefer a dirty garret. His attitude towards the luxuriousness he can't have gave me a hint for its contrast with the plebeian violence that wrecked French monarchy."

"Doesn't he dislike modern squandering?"

Ursula's face was eager, the mouth half opening, the chin tilted.

"The difference between the impecunious socialist and the bad, wasteful millionaires is the invariable one, dear — disagreement as to what should be spent on; Hunter says 'culture' for self and Co.; the wallower in lucre says 'comfort' for outsiders when self is served. But I must go to the gardeners; there are some new orchids to be placed."

"He describes marvellously. You discovered, too, that he is clever, Vin?"

"Yes; his brains sketch rapidly and well. You had better make him useful in his leisure hours; he might fill some of Madame's gap for you."

Mr. Nuton also left the room. When the sisters were alone Gwendolen propped her elbows on the

table, supported her head on both hands and continued to stare at the blind girl.

"Bob thinks I want a tour, but I don't mean to honeymoon more than a week, Ursie. I shall get back to start him runnin' charities. We shall begin on a Home of Rest for flower-girls,— he likes them. Increasin' traffic of London streets gets on their nerves, you know, an' nobody seems to have drawn attention to the cryin' need. Royalty's certain to applaud the object."

Not being able to see the slumbering scorn in the dark eyes under the heavy crest of hair, not detecting irony in the lazy tones, Ursula was happily deceived again.

"How beautiful! Of course you would rather work such a scheme than globe-trot. It's a scrap rough on Bob, isn't it, though? A man has only one honeymoon, unless he's very unfortunate."

"Wherever he is Bob will have me beside him," laughed Gwen.

Ursula sat in the library later, gleaning news of the day from the paper readers, puzzled now and then by the contradictory bits of information offered her. The Duke's crusted Toryism surged up and clouded every item; Mrs. Langham's laughter drowned most of a young barrister's defence of Eucken, while some rabid panegyrics upon ministers,

flung at the Duke by a "whip's" son, mingled with old Lady Theodore Green's incessant questions about Futurism.

Ursula was soon forgotten, as she did not press for attention. The babel of voices interested her, but she felt the queer sense of being far away that often drove her, as now, into solitude. To reach her own study, at the north-west angle of the Priory, she had to pass through a bevy of just descended, chattering young folk, gathering for a motor start to the Abbeyvalley golf-links, was hailed cheerfully by some, lachrymously by others, openly pitied by a child of fourteen, who, clutching her arm, cried:

"It's rotten for you not to be able to come too! What *do* you do with yourself all the mornings?"

"I am rather at a loose end now that Madame's away, Chrissie, but I think I shall type some letters."

How the tingle of the breeze swept down the hall when the party rushed out. What a crisp spring the turf would have to-day, and every twig of the early gorse must be laden with almond-scented golden buds.

Before she had been long at her typewriter Vincent, catching sight of her on his way back from instructing the gardening staff, came in by one long window. His sister's seeming neglect was a constantly recurring vexation to this kindly young man's proper pride.

"Isn't there any one to take you out this delectable morning, child?"

"No. At least, Louise is altering a gown for Edie Langham, Harriet has toothache, and I don't want Clark. February and a footman's arm are antagonistic. I'll go in the park only, by myself, when the day has so warmed up that creeping won't be chilly."

He stood tapping the window-pane fretfully, observing her with the annoyance of her deprivations that she could distinctly feel as an addition to their burden. Because when the blindness wounded her intimates she was sorrier for it.

"I simply cannot leave the house, nor can Gwen; Bob is coming soon, for a conclave before lunch."

"Settlements — deeds — still? I begin to think having too much money is a big bother."

"Something of the sort. Possessions, my dear, emotional, financial, or of the intellectual aspiration order, are but kinks in the chain. If I had not forgotten you for a minute you could have had Hunter for escort; he breakfasted while dressing, after but a couple of hours' sleep, and has just gone down the Warren at a pace not common to the city clerk. It's an extraordinary thing that in a house like this you ——"

"Don't fume. There are plenty of servants, only

I'm fastidious. It's just this wayward girl's notion that's to blame.'

"Have a ride. I'll send word to the stables."

"Yes, if you like, Vin."

He went away satisfied, as his sister meant him to be, so she was glad to endure one of her chief penances. Roaming the hills, dashing through the woodland openings on Dragonfly had been the delight of old days; now the steed was prevented from being fiery, exercised each daybreak that it might be suitably demure, and a groom, of mature years, kept close to interfere at the least chance of danger. It was not worth while to feel the easy movement, to taste the wind's freshness, to be carried on in the eternal void, since, on being asked at the summit of Clymper Peak, "What is the view like to-day?" all Jackson could answer, after a respectful throat-clearing cough, was:

"A bit foggy, miss, in the 'ollow."

All the way home Ursula's heart was crying out:

"Oh, why can't I die and begin another life with eyes wide open again?"

The next best alleviation would be to tramp along, at a great pace, through the Warren, over the heather-moor — anywhere — with a man who could see for her, and cared to.

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD, OLD STORY

JOEL was keeping away from the house-party. He was not anxious to explain that he did not understand golf, nor to be heckled further by Mrs. Langham, a cousin of the Nutons, who had shown too avid a disposition to be cordial. No doubt she was curious as to his position at Norbys. Sydney Crone was by birth entitled to be anywhere, but she seemed to scent a mystery, and the Ebbingstone-Nuton alliance amused her considerably. Also she was a journalist, and, for all Joel knew, might not scruple to make capital out of the burglaries. The changing of the great pearl had been the subject already of two spicy paragraphs.

At the end of his walk Joel, falling in with some amiable young men and General Protcock, on their way to the rifle range, was easily persuaded to join them, as he had practised assiduously at the two-penny gallery in the yard of the Victory Inn, Merrow Street. On return to the house there was but just time to get ready for lunch. Joel was by no means sure what he was supposed to achieve in the

way of costume, but a valet had solved the question by laying out his last spring's suit of gray, so he changed into that from the tweeds he had borrowed from young Rivers.

Ursula did not appear. He had been thinking of her, off and on, all morning; not solemnly, as the guiding star leading him away from Patty, making the Patty episode look squalid, but tenderly, as a fellow-spirit he could perhaps do something for. She was lonely, shut off from people by her affliction. Why shouldn't he ask her to be interested in his literary struggles? The success was certain some day — the virile purpose in him was guarantee of that; then she could share the triumph, feel that, blind though she was, she had helped in the making of a great writer. He supposed this Madame de Vert would laugh over his letters when reading them aloud; it is cruelly awkward to give oneself away in pages that must be voiced by a stranger; yet, if Ursula was cheered the experiment would be rewarded. He found himself taking quite the upper hand with Bob, when that lanky undesirable began telling him about Bernard Shaw's very latest.

"You're up against a *litterateur*," warned Vincent, who was near.

"Always get on with the real sort, even while barkin' my shins, because I don't mind sayin' I'm

not in it. Fact, Mr. Hunter, ain't it? — those who are in the know never smash up those who aren't and swear so? ”

“We're none of us profound, nor as well-stored as we should be. Criticism of any leader of thought is bound to be weak till the leader's dead, buried, and been sat in judgment upon for at least a quarter of a century.”

“'Pon my word, I'd like to get at your present opinion; we'll make an opportunity later.”

The last sentence was almost whispered, while Vincent and Gwendolen were answering the child Christine's shrill appeal for the aid of some unprejudiced persons in the solving of a golf-score riddle.

Joel had no objection to being winked at and flattered by Ebbingstone. It was all in the course of this unusual business. Still he was not pleased by it, as he undoubtedly was by Vincent's “you're-as-good-as-I ” manner.

He was surprised at being left alone with the gifts after lunch, Sydney Crone having cycled into Rye-ham town to converse, by telephone, with Ransom Leadley. Smith was conferring with old Mr. Nuton in the library, Vincent and Gwendolen were shut up elsewhere with the family lawyer, and also Bob's legal representative. Ebbingstone himself was supposed to go for a drive until his signature was wanted, but

Joel caught sight of his emerald car stopped at a turn of the avenue, so knew that his place of temporary exile was not distant. Once again the watching of the wedding presents seemed ridiculous. The February day had become brilliant; gardeners were sweeping the wide lawns outside the range of southern windows; the west casement of the room gave entrance into a heated conservatory where flowers were glorious. This had been closely shuttered before.

The homely look of genistas, deutzias, and primulas, just beyond the screen holding the Vandyck "Girl Frowning," and the table spread with silver plate, set Joel reflecting that this highly-paid job of his was idiotically servile, one of a sort his independence ought to have revolted from. Better black an aristocrat's boots, which have to be blacked by somebody, than stand about, in best clothes, smoking his cigars, and seeing that baubles did not disappear. No, the Vandyck, the Japanese prints, the exquisitely-bound Saint-Beuve were not baubles. As for jewels, hadn't he half resolved to buy Patty a ring out of his unusual earnings? As a rule his mother knew, to within a few shillings, how he spent his money; a slight deception as to the amount of the cheque he would receive from Ransom Leadley would . . . But he no longer wished to buy Patty the ring that was to have sealed a pledge, the trinket that

would have meant an acknowledgment of indebtedness, a promise to marry her when no mother lived to be hurt. He might offer Patty a brooch — of much greater value than the ring would have been — that would act as salve to his sore conscience, if she really could be gratified by the gift. The chances were that she wouldn't. She was one of the cutest women on earth. *Had* he formerly decided on the ring? Looking backwards he believed that he had. Joel, at moments, was wont to think the worst of himself.

Mother's present out of the cheque had been fully settled about. It was to be a dust-coat — a silken one. As a rule dust-coats, he knew, were to cover costly, delicate gowns while travelling, but this one was to hide, from church-goers, that the wearer had not changed her dress, was attired in a blouse and skirt, although it was Sunday morning. Because then she could help Clara dish up, and not make dinner much after one o'clock, as Dorothy wouldn't "stop" if kept late from the succession of boys she walked out with.

Joel had spent an hour consulting fashion-paper advertisements with his mother the evening before he came away. The precise dust-coat was chosen. He was to take her, on Saturday, to Oxford Street, to have it fitted on. He had asked Clara what he

should give her out of the windfall, but her reply had been characteristic.

"Fudge! Nothing. I don't require any man to spend on me. Oh, since I mend your clothes, pay me by having my laced boots soled again. The water comes through."

"I'd rather give you something nice to keep," he had protested. This had brought Clara into her most amiable state.

"Thanks, old boy. I really don't appreciate any of the usual follies. We'll go and see Wagner in the pictures."

She had no genuine desire to witness Wagner — that was a sop to her brother; she really yearned after the White Slave story, "founded on fact," that followed, for which it would be necessary to wait in order not to miss the "topicals" that ended the nine o'clock round. She loved to prove herself right in holding that Man is vile; also was pleasantly excited by a share in any attack, whether expressed by an orator or on a sheet. Her principal solace in life was the knowledge how much ought to be mended or ended.

All his adult years Joel had sweetened his lot by as wide-reaching an inner protest — out of which sprang his resolution to be "a man for a' that" — to get on from out his low rut, to look consistently

down upon the leisured, vulgarly luxurious. So it was a degenerate position in which he stood at the moment, protecting the toys of the wealthy.

Yet Norbys Priory suited his taste; the oiled machinery seemed a blest invention for sparing a man's time and mind for the things that matter. If he had scorned the brandy that had come up with the cup of tea to wake him that morning at the hour arranged — though the real lace of the bed-quilt had typified waste — he had thoroughly forgiven the Nuton custom of supplying each guest with the papers and magazines he or she chose to write a list of on arriving, also of the habitual sending of the third footman, or fifth housemaid, to inquire, during toilette performance, what motors, horses, cycles, would be liked after breakfast.

Yes, he was becoming reconciled to lavish living that so ministered to the body's well-being that the mental faculties throve. It was good to be alive after a perfect bath, in a splendid neighbourhood, fed by appetising viands, among inspiring acquaintances. He was accustomed to a scanty supply of water and to sparing the cheapest sanitary soap; to seeing uglinesses on all sides; to eating inferior food-stuffs, often ill-cooked; to have to limit his subjects of conversation to those which mother and Clara would understand enough to take interest in. He was a

model son and brother, generous, all excusing, self-effacing, but he suffered more than he had known until now. The gardeners had finished sweeping the lawns, and vanished, the indoor servants had left off crossing and recrossing the hall after the lunch; all was quiet except for a step in the conservatory. Ursula was there, pausing to touch a blossom occasionally, to run her fingers along a fern frond, or fondle the downy begonia foliage. In the intervals of feeling she drank deep breaths of the perfumed air, and smiled.

If Joel had thought her wonderful in the evening gown he preferred her costume now, a china blue dress visible where the Romola cloak hung open. Her dark brown hair was uncovered.

The lover of literature gave her the names of many heroines, knowing that she resembled none exactly, and yet all. There was the young vividness of Rhona; the undeveloped passion-power of Juliet; the playfulness of Beatrice; something of the rebellion of warm-hearted Maggie Tulliver; the unsatisfiedness of Candida; the pathos of chained Andromeda; the dignified, tender purity of the Madonna; the pride of . . . ?

There seemed no example for that quality in her; he fancied it was a tremendous force. And how was it that the black mask to her eyes did not prevent the

fine-featured face from being intensely expressive?

All the effect she had produced upon him before revived for Joel as he let himself gaze. Then, after bolting the door of the room as a precaution against danger in which he did not believe, he went to speak to her among the flowers.

Directly his step rang on the tessellated pavement she knew whose it was.

“So you are on guard, Mr. Hunter?”

“Yes, alone. That orchid you touched is the colour of dead-ripe corn in hedge shadow, but its petals have a blotch each of sepia, ragged-edged, and a rim of lemon. The shape is indescribable; the rows of little blossoms all looking one way remind me of children singing, open-mouthed, over a pew — that is the pot-rim. These white cyclamen are the sweetest flowers here. May I gather you some?”

“Guide my fingers instead. Picking is such a joy, but I daren’t risk it here, only in the woods and fields.”

Her hand, white and so smooth, reminded him that only a few days ago he had congratulated himself on not objecting to the ill-shaped nails of Patty’s.

“You went a tremendous walk this morning?”

“I don’t know how far. Then I did some rifle-range work, and the General complimented me. Why do we all take more pleasure in being praised for an

unusual job than in our habitual grind? But I forgot — you don't know what daily toil is."

"Of late I've typed and calculated a deal in the cause of Madame's pet charities. Formerly I did nothing more useful than play the church organ, and the piano at concerts. Perhaps that was why blindness was sent — for a rebuke."

"Don't think it! God's not a vampire," broke out Joel vehemently.

"I didn't mean to blame the happening. I had to be made to keep still enough to think."

"*You?*"

"Yes, I was a hoyden as a child; then a rather wild young woman, caring most for sports and exercise. Even still I lose my temper when the daffodils must be out in Abbey woods and, my companion being away, I haven't anybody to take me to them. Can you fancy viewing wild flowers with a footman's escort?"

Trembling for his audacity Joel asked:

"Should I do any better? Let us walk somewhere this evening. . . . Please don't snub me. . . . You've no conception what this is to me. . . . Not because your name is Miss Nuton — because of your personality. . . . I feel risen."

"When will you have liberty?"

"Five o'clock."

"Too late for woods; but we can catch the sunset behind the Peak if we hurry. Vincent said I might have shared your tramp this morning to the Warren if you would have taken me. . . . But I know you would."

The man's face so lit up that perhaps she felt the glow in it. His brusque voice, as he answered, so pleased her that she gave a happy laugh.

"I've been speculating on the possibility of friendship between us, and I needn't. The thing's determined. . . . We are friends. No doubt that's some of the good you want to do in life."

CHAPTER V

GUARDING THE JEWELS

SMITH would not have been at ease, smoking with Mr. Nuton in the finest library owned by English commoner, if he had not understood that Vincent Nuton was with the presents. Vincent had manœuvred to leave them with Hunter, with Gwendolen's full approval. Bob was supposed to drive himself about, but brother and sister knew that the emerald car and its owner were lurking. The two lawyers were quite happy, opposing one another with the utmost courtesy.

Smith had deep admiration for old Mr. Nuton, the Squire, as people called him. Here was a staunch landowner capitalist who made property management the business of his career; whose house was his desired kingdom; who was a Conservative because Nutons always were, yet raised up the tenants and the poor on the most modern lines. In short, a gentleman who practised socialism but never talked it. Smith had just said:

"Seems to me, sir, as you treats all men as if they was the gentlemen too they aren't."

A confused speech that gave a right impression of fact.

"We must address the best in our fellows, or we are answered, generally, by the worst," said the handsome old man. "In my long experience I have proved my father's axiom, 'Live at peace, as the world will always let the determined man who preserves good temper.' We have had to get rid of a ne'er-do-weel, drunken tenant of the Warren Farm; a rancorous landlord would have made a foe. Poor Grummett was evicted weeping after I had talked to him of his failings."

"There you are, sir, uttering sentiments as builds up nations, yet you won't enter Parliaments."

The Squire gave the chuckle that was his nearest condescension to a laugh.

"One trade is sufficient, Smith. Governing England constitutionally is better left to those who are not obliged to govern privately. You, now, would not care to be a borough surveyor as well as a detective's right hand man, eh?"

Smith was launched. Almost with tears in his eyes he gave Mr. Nuton the history of his juvenile ambitions, his adult performances, the present day injustices and insults that impeded his triumphant progress. As he sipped liqueurs he forgot that his immediate duty was being abandoned.

Vincent and Gwendolen, pursuing their father's policy, acting up to their grandfather's axiom, were genially agreeing to all that the lawyers agreed upon. The bride's presence was a check upon Mr. Keepe's defence of his client's involved finances, but a still greater drag on the eloquence with which Mr. Avorn, the Nuton solicitor, would have painted the bridegroom black.

"The unlucky boy has gotten himself into an awful hole," Gwen remarked, stifling a yawn with the back of her pretty hand. "As an urchin he always lost his marbles directly, an' smashed his bird's-eggs, while mine were hoarded. I remember givin' him a nasty thrashin' in the hayloft once, because he couldn't find my best plume moth that I'd swapped for an ounce of butter-scotch. It's a comfort I'm his elder. He'll need a deal of runnin'; you know all about that, Mr. Keepe, now, don't you."

"I admit there are the . . . er . . . the faults of his qualities in him. Impulses of generosity are almost invariably accompanied by what may be termed laxness with regard to personal expenditure. Then consider, my dear Miss Nuton, how galling it is for a young man, head of his house, to be perpetually handicapped by ——"

Mr. Avorn cut in.

"The handicapping is the result, not the starting impediment, Keepe, let me remind you."

"In my opinion," said Vincent's suave voice, "that makes Ebbingstone's case more irksome — to himself, I mean. The what-a-fool-I've-been condition is punishment to us all at times. Let us make his position as consoling as is consistent with prudence. The proposed income, to be paid him monthly, subject to a few restrictions, will not be his all. I have assured him this morning that he shall have everything proper that he covets, down to new racing stables, merely without title deeds, documentary proofs of possession, rights of sale or mortgage."

"You'll be proud of Bob when he gets known as a noble young philanthropist, Mr. Keepe. That'll repay your benevolent fathership all the years of his frivollin'."

"Lord Ebbingstone is not showing the due acknowledgment of the leniency with which his habit of . . . we will say of losing, has been forgiven."

Mr. Avorn stated this, frowning portentously.

"The creature's nothin' but a nerve-bundle just now; don't be hard on him."

"My dear Miss Gwen, having watched your growth since your infancy I ——"

"You're more than half in love with me yourself, and as jealous as a hen with one chicken, eh? It's charmin' of you, old friend, but I'm bent on showin' you, in a year or two, what even Bob can be turned into."

The future philanthropist was meanwhile fuming in the shrubbery glades, wondering how to cure his own most pressing trouble. He had seen Ursula talking with Hunter in the conservatory, watched her departure down the rock-garden, and was making his own way, under cover, to the house. Without crossing the lawns he reached the terrace on the side furthest from the rooms where he knew his affairs were being discussed. A soft entrance of the drawing-room gave him access to the hall, from which he escaped by the lobby, and so on to the verandah walk again.

Joel, looking out, saw the pale young man at the study window, so politely admitted him.

"I'm shelved, like old bottles, Hunter. Great confabulations going on, but not a soul for me to speak to, so thought I'd pal up with you. Wind's too sharp for drivin'."

"It's right temperature for walking."

"Give me a fireside, unless one can be hittin' a ball or somethin'. Books and an arm-chair, that's your style, eh; and mine, too, when I'm not off col-

our as to spirits. It's rotten chaos, my lot. Rather!"

Joel was not altogether unfriendly. The type irritated, but the confidences amused.

"Soon be mended, won't it?" he asked in cheering tones.

Ebbingstone, with hands plunged in his pockets, was gazing down at the Crown Derby dinner-service.

"Gwen's a smart woman, ain't she? Looks her best in orange or scarlet, not white, though. Only débutantes and young wives should wear white; she's gettin' wrinkled. Oughtn't at twenty-six only; but, Lord, how they slack down here; not enough goin' on, that's what ages you. I'm knocked up by it myself."

"You do not look particularly fit," Joel admitted.

Bob fumbled in several pockets; producing cigars, thrust many into a tortoise-shell case, and placed it in Joel's hands.

"Smoke 'em, an' think of me. I'll send you some boxes if you'll let me have your address. Might look you up, too, some day in town, an' go on discussin' Shaw. The case? Oh, keep that. Gwen's given me the usual gold 'un, initialled in brilliants. You can't refuse. Why, I'm acceptin' a crowd from you. Awfully dull job this for you, ain't it? How those confounded terriers growl outside the door;

they ought to know my voice. But Nuton's not had 'em many months. . . . What do you think of Gwen's little show here? "

"Those ivory statuettes ought to be at South Kensington."

"But the jewelry? I'm a judge there, and most of it's my gift to her — family stuff. There's three or four pieces should have been re-set; she don't like long ear-rings, an' the ruby necklace isn't safe to sport."

"That's a pity. However, I conclude she won't want to wear anything so elaborate yet."

Ebbingstone turned to the safe.

"Come and unlock this for me. I'll show you what's wrong. We'll measure the size for the new clasp; I've a goldsmith's rule with me. I've this duplicate key, but I'd rather you used it. The trick's a bit complicated."

"Mr. Nuton has the jewels in an inner safe."

Bob's watery eyes opened much wider.

"Inside this? The devil he has! . . . What's that for? "

"Precaution."

"Well, haven't you got that key too? "

"Yes. I'm to lay out the stuff at 4.30. A tea-party is coming to inspect it. Smith will be back by then; I won't anticipate the time."

"My dear boy, you must for me. They're as much mine as Gwen's, ain't they?"

"No. One doesn't both give and keep. As a matter of fact, they're your family's, were conveyed down by your lawyer's men, in your mother's safe. I shouldn't call them yours. They'll belong to Miss Gwendolen Nuton when she has changed her name, then, on her decease, to your eldest son's wife. Meanwhile, they are waiting heirlooms."

Ebbingstone was shaking like a leaf.

"We won't get them out, Hunter; you're right. But I must measure that clasp, or the jeweller chap can't have the new one made."

"At 4.30 you'll have your chance," said Joel.

There was a long silence in the study, and the dogs growled on outside the door. At last Bob said:

"The clasp's a surprise. Awfully nobby sort, set with an engraved black pearl. None of the Nutons are to know till it's done — and Smith would blab, you don't need tellin' that. Look here, hand over the key, there's a good chap."

"No."

Joel was amazed by the meekness with which Lord Ebbingstone took the refusal; so much astonished that he relented as to the manner of it.

"I'm sorry I can't see my way to do as you ask."

Bob kept his back turned; only a pimple-covered neck was visible.

"It's infernally absurd. You don't suppose I want to damage family gems, that my bride's to be presented in next May? Wherever we are we're returnin' to town for that. And it's deuced careless of Vincent to gather the best things together in an inner safe — damned risky."

"Why?"

"It's not much of a weight, is it?"

"Of course not."

"There you are then! The thief who got the pearl an' the powder-box could nip the whole up an' bolt."

"He would have to get into the outer safe first."

"But he couldn't pick up the big 'un and run."

"No, I see your point."

"I've a good mind to have the jewels back till the weddin's over."

"Why don't you?"

"There's a regular gang at work, so I've heard to-day."

"Who told you?"

"One of my men. At any rate, he said there was when Mrs. Vansittart's house was broken into last year, only three miles off. . . . You're takin' prime care of the things, Hunter, so I won't howl at Vin-

cent's boshy safe, and I'd be obliged if you didn't mention that I'm vexed."

"The necklace will be on show in about an hour."

"But Smith will be on show, too."

"Undoubtedly," laughed Joel.

Ebbingstone turned round suddenly and wrung his hand.

"I must do somethin' for you later on. Nuton won't bother; he's got the ghastly, wrapped-up-in-the-family way with him they all have; nobody's of consequence who ain't of it. He thinks he'll turn me into one of 'em — infernal respectable — rather not. I'll be decent my own style or not at all. Atrocious cheek! I'll get you a better job, see if I don't. And we'll have that talk about Shaw yet; but I'll be off now. The way I came'll suit me best — back to the car. You see they guess I'm drivin'. I was to get back at four sharp."

Joel whistled softly to himself when the bridegroom had slipped out of the window. The task before him looked a trifle less ridiculous now. Still, what was he, ironmonger's clerk, dweller in Chalk Farm district, embryo novelist, socialist by conviction, doing mixed up in a county family's fate? If all the jewels went nobody would actually suffer; not so much as one pang of human hunger or shiver, one bodily pain, one spiritual deprivation would re-

sult if every wedding-gift were swept into the Red Sea. That is the consequence when superfluities are hoarded. Value that might bless lay idle on tables, screens, and in the safes. Why was he, who knew the vile folly of collecting petrified worth, helping the Nutons keep a clutch on it?

Working himself into an iconoclastic state of mind Joel paced the floor beside the presents. He saw that a scandal certainly threatened, and, though he would have preferred to see the gems scattered, the objects of art given to the nation, he felt it would be regrettable for time-honoured names to be dragged into the public mud. Yes, the keeping facts dark, as Vincent had said, might be more important than safeguarding any of the trinkets. So, when Smith asked him if anything remarkable had happened during the early afternoon, he answered. "It was awfully monotonous."

Before then Vincent had come in — Smith found them together — and Joel had given a private, unvarnished, uninterpreted sketch of Ebbingstone's conduct.

It was a shade disappointing that Gwendolen's brother made no striking comment. Didn't he *see*? Or, if he saw, wasn't he anxious? All he said was:

"Many thanks. Let us go on quite quietly."

There was no chance to ask if he thought it pru-

dent to have the most precious stones in the inner safe. They were being laid out on white and red velvet when Joel returned from an errand on which he had been sent. Vincent was joking with Smith on a political topic, apparently forgetful of the whole reason for the presence of detectives.

At five o'clock Joel thankfully went off duty.

CHAPTER VI

THE WORTH OF A SUNSET

JOEL was full of stiff feelings as he passed round the terrace to join Vincent's sister outside her sitting-room, according to arrangement. It was Miss Nuton he saw waiting for him, that dignified figure in a tailor-cut coat and skirt of green, crowned by a tricorn hat to match.

Ursula was troubled by proud anxieties as she stood listening for the step she knew so well already. He was a stranger, and she had almost begged the charity of his help. How could she be sure that he would not grudge the expenditure of his free time? It was such a vigorous step that it set her pulses throbbing fast, as a brass band playing a march did, or the sound of a passing crowd, at times. Joel had to stifle his Radical independence while he approached. He wanted her sympathy so much that he had asked for it once, and knew he would again; but what if she only gave patronage?

Ursula wondered if the sight of her black shade disgusted him? Nobody knew how she hated the imagination of it, that symbol of worse ugliness beneath.

When she moved a step to greet him, and her face showed the serenity that was her adopted mood, in addition to the pathos that the stillness of the blind always conveys, when her lips smiled, Joel recovered and became joyful.

When his grasp seized her hand and drew it within his arm, Ursula's pride softened, and the doubts dropped away.

It was not an outsider, in reluctant awe of the family who said abruptly:

"Tell me which way?"

It was a girl as untrammelled by social distinctions as he who answered quickly:

"Through the orchard over there, up the field to the gap among the beeches, then you'll see the Peak unmistakably."

The irresistible impulse of mutual attraction was at work; as simply as children they obeyed it, but, with the strategy unneeded by children, called it friendship. Unconscious strategy, of course. Neither coquetted, nor thought about the love which is passion. Somehow they were satisfied that they wanted to be with each other.

At first he led her at a slow walk. Then she gave an order.

"Fast, please. I can go at a great pace. Vincent taught me to stride when he was a school-boy.

Oh, I shan't stumble; or if I should I shall hold myself up by your arm."

In the garden they were just shy enough of each other to relish the novelty of going in step; by the orchard gate there was a hint of scrupulous ceremony in his method of holding it open, conducting her through, taking the gray-gloved hand back to its place again; half way down the rough track her foot tripped on a stone, at a swifter pace still, with a rhythmic swing, in the perfect accord of well matched dancers. Ursula could forget her blindness, Joel that she was a Nuton.

The field was within sight of all the windows of the Priory, but when the gap in the beechwood was passed through and another grass hill had to be breasted, the two were alone.

It was a grand climb against a north-west wind that tried to push them back, over slippery chalk-nurtured tussocks, and they were hot and semi-breathless when the Peak plateau was gained. Chimneys and top windows of the house could be seen from here; responding to the primordial instinct of the lover Joel led his companion to the other side of a gorse thicket, where only a couple of yards of earth intervened between them and a precipice. His right hand sought hers on the sleeve of the overcoat that she had found out was by no means new — was

losing its nap. Having brought her there he was almost afraid, because she was so few steps from the deep, rocky gorge he could not see; it was wiser to hold her lest she started off too recklessly.

"We are on the verge," she said. "There are ragged sides, half whitey-gray, half gravelly, to which little bushes are clinging desperately, and the one or two stunted hawthorns have their heads bent. All the slopes are riddled by rabbits and scored by the little claws of sand martins. In some places heather has found crannies to occupy, but it's all withered looking, until you peer down at some at the base. An oozy pool lies there, between green banks smooth as golf-links, unbroken turf, that is too damp for a warren, tiny isthmuses of sand too, from which wagtails bathe later in springtime."

"You don't need any man's eyes."

"Oh, yes, I do. I've my memories, just as I've my limbs, but both can go only in certain ways and places, not buoyantly or with certainty. It's a horrid blow to guess, and fail. You can have no idea how humiliating. It stings pride. I think the sky is flaming orange. Is it?"

Joel bit his lip.

"Not an atom."

Ursula's mouth drooped. Then she gave his arm a pat of approval.

"I was dreading that you might prevaricate, out of mistaken kindness. Is the sunset pale, then?"

"Recollect the shades in a half ripe lemon, the green that merges into yellow; lay a flutter of copperbeech leaves over the blend, with a few sprays of that silvery conservatory thing, what is it? — eucalyptus, of course — to break the brown. Right over the curious ruddy mass are lines of slate, with bar edges of dazzling cream light, meeting the expanse of a blue frosted over with gray vapours. A church steeple has grown black and forbidding, nothing like a monument of love."

"It's that to you — even with the cross on the summit?"

"I'm not an unbeliever."

"You're good?"

"Fairly. If I say no you will misunderstand. The sort of goodness that's mostly habit, that ideas and wishes can smirch."

It was the oddest conversation, unpardonable on the girl's part, perhaps, rather disgraceful and misleading on his. But they were following their desire to understand each other; the element of their peculiar, ordained and growing bond no longer surprised either.

"I should be a hypocrite if I didn't answer as a Pharisee;" Joel went on, thoughtfully. "I've not

gone with the ruck of men in trampling on Commandments for the fun of it. I can't say what I might have done if it hadn't been for my mother, with her Quaker susceptibilities afloat in the home, and her reliance on my moral respectability. I can't decide what I mightn't do . . . no, mightn't have been about to do. As a matter of principle I'd prefer the spiritual state of the Publican, as would loads of mortals. I suspect that misreadings of that parable have hit morality more knocks than it's had from advanced opinions. The subject resolves itself into the question, 'What ~~is~~ goodness?' Don't you think so?"

"Not being good, but loving and striving after virtue."

"Keeping clean, and wanting the respect of self and others."

"Loathing the least soil, seen or secret."

"The two points of view can join."

"I think a big craving after personal perfectness so absorbs a man's energy that he can't spare a thought for the effect of his outer shell. Or, if he feels right with God, he forgets to bother about how men see him."

"It's always the pearl within the shell that he requires estimated at its value, generally with an eye to recompense."

"That's sarcasm."

"I'm often taken that way. Wouldn't it be ripping if we could live up to the sublimities we profess to appreciate?"

Ursula hesitated.

"It couldn't be good for long. Our heads would be turned."

Joel looked at her lips instead of at the scene.

"The sunset is quivering at the brink of the cloud-grave. . . . I'll give you an illustration of what being a humbug is before we walk again. At eighteen I was pious; the name of the Lord was always ready on my tongue, I fired up in His defence, I flogged myself and prayed in the night, saw all sorts of visions, heard voices calling me to . . . to testify. There was a theft in the office, a forged cheque cashed, and I happened to have proof that the fool was the venerable manager—never mind why. Suspicion fell on me, the newcomer from the north. Mr. Leadley is a first-rate sort; he gave me every encouragement to confess. Finally, he told me he knew I was guilty. It was Christmas Eve, he wouldn't tell a creature, my mother needn't know, the matter was to be buried between ourselves. All he wanted was—not an admission—just my promise to run straight."

"You weren't a humbug. . . . I don't understand."

Joel's characteristic voice grew more resonant as he talked on, to her beautiful, partially-eclipsed face.

"Well, but what's the lesson of the Christlike? The not sparing oneself for the sake of a brother's rescue. Being ready to sacrifice all at a large enough call. Remember I was being holy as I could, not aiming at ordinary rectitude. My boy's heart was alive with zeal; I believed that the world's well lost for the prevention of one sin. No; I don't show much like that now, but you can fancy me so? Awful crude, but intense?"

"Oh, yes."

"I spent a night wrestling with temptation, and gave in. I ruined the man, who couldn't be forgiven like a raw youngster who might be moulded better, the man who, I guessed, wouldn't put up with shame, whose ailing wife must learn she had a rival, whose sons would turn on him, whose daughters would be sure to despise, and be despised in their turn, by their husbands, by society, as forger's children. I could have got off with no greater punishment than my employer's forgiveness. In a measure I'd have got on better, been taken more interest in as a brand snatched from burning."

"What happened?"

"The manager hanged himself in the office. There was a fearful scandal. Mr. Leadley asked my par-

don. And that was when I sank my religious fervour."

"You didn't love God enough,—but who does?" Ursula told him. "That's the whole explanation. We should be saints if we did. Why, if a man even loves a woman completely he will bear any amount of shame rather than fail her. But, luckily for us, we aren't called on to be Christs exactly, not . . . Oh, I don't know! You told the truth. There's always good in that."

"It didn't fit in with my convictions of where duty led."

"We are unsatisfactory to ourselves, all of us," she said regretfully. "I'm supposed to be resigned, but am I? I say so, because I can't flout God; but how much acceptance is there really in me when I fight the first morning sunshine? But you can't understand that."

"Yes, I can. Let's give up thinking we can never fathom each other's just-hinted-at moods, facts, views, etc. We're in touch extraordinarily, though I'm an outsider."

"So am I."

She touched her shade.

"Is it that prevents your being just a . . . a Nuton?"

"No. I often felt alien before then. They're

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so . . . so settled down, even dear Gwen. I want to fling myself into something queer and free. The things that engross them aren't my choice. What *does* the world care about now? ”.

“Success. It's the old ambition, travelled to by changing and changed routes. Sometimes I say to myself, ‘Thank Providence I don't any longer fret to be a successful saint.’ Are you shocked? ”

“No; but that's foolish. Sanctity is always so sure of being abashed, before men and self, that it wouldn't know it had succeeded here. Is your mother still a member of the Society of Friends? ”

“No; but she still hugs their rules. She was married in the Church of England. Shall we walk right across the shadow in the valley and come home by the hill-tops? ”

The girl assented, though she knew the hollow would be chilly.

“We have a great deal to tell each other at the beginning of our friendship, but you more than I.”

“Surely not? That sounds awfully like a subterfuge.”

He saw a blush run over the cheek nearest to him.

“Not wholly. Women don't explain themselves to themselves when they are afraid of finding out how foolish they are. There are no confessions ready prepared to give.”

"I want to hear how you lost your sight."

"That's easy to answer. There was a fire at a children's fête, at Abbeyvalley hall four years ago last Christmas. I was trying to get the babies out. So were all the other teachers."

"You darling! . . . I beg pardon. That's how I burst out at the mother. It comes natural."

"I won't have my pardon asked. It's nonsensical. You and I stand together, beyond the barbed wire of custom in a newly-created friendship land for ourselves alone. If it's to be a real help to us we must be plain and bold explorers. I'd rather say good-bye at once than go on with you both shamming conventionality."

They were climbing again the slant side of so steep a meadow that talking was scarcely possible till they reached the summit, hand in hand, panting.

"What a marvel it all is! Any one would call me a bare-faced bounder who heard me say this, but . . . I'm positive you were somehow groping for me last night in the corridor."

"Why not? People give blind women all they can — kind, thoughtful words, support, guidance, books. You were ready to give me a lot of yourself, your trust, and no doubt I was sent searching for you."

"You don't object to me, that's the mystery."

Yet you must know I'm one of the commonplace, shabby young men of city and suburbs, all the more ordinary for cherishing yearnings and covering reams of paper in solitude. Of course I'm a believer in my ultimate triumph and the winning of a name."

"How cold the air is, and the birds are silent. Night has come down swiftly after the sun's going. But I'm gloriously warm and happy. The marvel to me is that I'm sure you won't forget me. We shall quarrel, I expect, learn one another's faults and nasty meannesses, and even sulk awhile, but we shall never drift apart."

"I shall fear we have. You'll become Miss Nuton again as soon as you're hidden."

"Not if I tell you I shall constantly be thinking of you as my friend, Joel."

"How did you know my name?"

"Vincent told me. I like it. When you're tempted to grow prickly say to yourself, 'I've given Ursula somebody to be interested in, the book of my life to read, and it makes her blissful.' Won't that help?"

"Immensely."

"That brave. Why the Hebrew meaning of Joel is 'acquiescing.' I'm really nothing but a society girl pulled up short and planted again to

grow with less rampant carelessness. You're a man. You'd rather be yourself consequently — though only a clerk — and I'd much rather be one too. Where are we now? What is round us?"

They stopped by a wood of young larches that the wind whistled through. Joel told her of the darkening sky; the inky strips between the trees, the rush of wild birds out of the blackthorn hedge at their approach; the mellow glimmer of the Priory's well-lit windows as seen through the falling night moisture. Then he added:

"No, I don't dread your rebuking me for presumption. I only know I should have dreaded that if . . ."

"If," repeated Ursula, as a conclusion, not a question. Then her voice became impatient. "Under the evening star what does anything matter but sincerity? I'm curious about you. There's so much for me to hear before I can share your hopes properly. We must be together as often as we can manage. We both wish it."

"Yes, but . . . that *you* should say so."

"The blind must be excused for going eagerly where they can. And you will never misinterpret. You're a man of singular keenness of sympathy."

"How you do read me," he cried. "I believe

that is the one shining attribute of this mortal clod
— sympathy.”

“I see — by blind sight,” said Ursula.

She smiled her best at him.

CHAPTER VII

A STRUGGLE

It was the need for the superman Joel and Ursula were debating on the way back, a subject that puts class distinction and the barrier of short acquaintanceship entirely on one side. For those who aim at superness are of one kin, of course, and whether their clothes are of the past cut or not is of no possible concern, which may be why some persons take so kindly to the cult — but not these two. They were prodigiously sincere. She had just restrained his modest inclination to return by the back of the house, and was repeating what Madame de Vert would have said on the subject:

“Avoiding people’s a mistake. Brush aside those who get in your path, or sort of walk through them.”

“There is a pride,” answered Joel, “that shirks places it feels it has a right to be in if the world doesn’t agree with it.”

“You wouldn’t bother if you were coming in with Vincent.”

“No.”

“Then it is because you are a man and I a girl. You must shake yourself free of that trouble, please,

and remember I am not a marriageable woman any longer; nobody wants a blind wife. So nobody can imagine you would like to marry my money. Oh, dear, how brutally frank I can be! But I know you will need plain speaking often. We're just comrades, two humans going in the same direction."

"But I'm shamming here — a mock guest."

"This time. You will come again and again by special invitation."

Joel could scarcely grasp that. He had anticipated a friendship from a distance, with Madame de Vert reading the letters. The great front of the Priory did not look inhospitable any longer, looming through the dark, his step was firm as he guided the girl up the coach-and-four steps, as they were called in allusion to a famous wager; he was not embarrassed when Gwendolen, a magnificent vision, in rose pink, lounged out of the drawing-room and regarded him with a humorous smile.

"Well, you look wild, both of you. Been running? The wind wouldn't let you walk down from the Peak, I fancy. She seems brightened up; she doesn't get enough of the violent exercise she loves. Thanks, Mr. Hunter."

Ursula was waiting for him to reply as he chose, he understood that. "Don't thank me. I've been having the time of my life."

Gwendolen's laugh was quite easy. To her he seemed another consumptive village carpenter, farmer's son coming to practise the big organ of the music gallery, bed-ridden almswoman to be gossiped with, one more of Ursie's pets, and as harmless. That is to say, as safe for Ursie. He might get a heartache, but even that, if it mattered at all, he could include in "the time of his life." The faint pressure of Ursula's hand on his arm, before she let it go, assured him that she commended his frankness to her sister.

"We find we have a great deal in common, Gwen."

"No doubt, books and philosophies, etc. I've been on the rack, talking twaddle to local folk who wanted to know 'everything,' in their devotion to the family, bless them! I've sketched Bob's fine future career till he's got a species of halo round him, and he hasn't stirred from the ordeal once, so we're a pair of martyrs. What's the matter, have the dogs found a cat on the lawn?"

She hurried out to ascertain the cause of the terriers' strange yells of agony, several men servants followed, running, then Vincent, coming in from the terrace, pushed her back.

"Not a sight for you, dear; keep out of it. No, not rabies,—poison, I believe. They've picked up something in the shrubbery."

"Oh, the poor little beasts!" cried Ursula, putting her hands to her ears.

Vincent was out again in a minute, and the cries ceased after two shots. Palley, the butler, turned to Joel.

"The stable yard Dalmatians were killed yesterday, sir. Two dogs in the town, too, and one at Grove's Farm. There's a gang of blackguards at work in this neighbourhood, so they say."

"Who says so? I mean, who told you?"

"It was Clarke, the second footman, brought the information in with him last evening, sir."

Mr. Nuton came from the library, accompanied by Ebbingstone, who had to be told of the tragedy.

"Pure bred, weren't they? Nice little brutes, anyhow. Awfully sorry for you. Must keep a sharp look-out over my bull."

Ursula's voice had a kind of catch in it, as she asked,

"Oh, Bob, what must I do to protect Laird?"

"Great Dane,—takes her out, Hunter," explained the amiable young man. "Keep him on lead near the house for a spell; open country's right-oh, it's those burglars I told you about, who want our stuff, eh, Gwen?"

If Vincent had passed through any emotional minutes he came in with his most unruffled air.

It was time to dress for dinner, so, clapping Bob on the shoulder, he took him upstairs.

Joel reflected, with some amusement, while in the hands of the valet who looked after him, that he had come to Norbys intending, in his leisure hours, amid beautiful scenes and in luxurious rooms, to finish a crucial chapter of a novel. Instead he was living a romance of composite character. Chalk Farm seemed to have so receded into the back ground of his life that it was almost a shock to see the post-mark on the letter awaiting him from his mother. When he could get rid of the man he sat down before the marble-topped table under the triple shaving mirror, rested his elbows among the gold-mounted jars for creams, lip-salves, and hair-washes, propped his head between his hands, and so read the spread out sheets of straggly writing, that were full of love and counsel from afar.

“10, Ellen Road,

“Primrose Hill, N.W.

“*February 14.*

“MY DEAREST BOY,

“I could hardly rest last night for wondering if they had put you into a damp bed, but I comforted myself with remembering how nice and thick the new sleeping suit was. If you have the least fear you

have caught a chill put your feet into hot mustard and water; there's a dear; you will find a little screw of it with the cake of soap, unless you tumbled it out with the paper when you unpacked. How are you getting on with them all? I shall be dreadfully angry if young Rivers has let you in for going to a place where the people can be such snobs, no matter their rank, as to snub you. Your father always told me to hold my head up wherever I was, not for display, or arrogance, which the lowly born can feel as much as the grand, but to prove that all honest people are equal, except that some have healthy bodies and sane minds, and others are born different, or become so. Of course that was the doctor's way of looking at the question, and it would have been better if he had said we are all equal in the sight of God. In spite of your independence, darling, you do seem sometimes to feel unlike gentlefolks, especially when one happens to come near, when you get your savage mood on, and I do not think that should be, since you say you are a gentleman, and I am certain of it too. If I were as sure you are as high and superior in the spiritual life how I should rejoice over you, even with tears of joy, as mothers do, my own boy, but we can always return, you know, however we have gone astray. I can write this, though I could not say it, for words slip out impatient in answer sometimes

from a young man, and I know you would be truly sorry if you hurt me. I just put it down now, as well as I can, not being literary, that you may think over your state while you are in that beautiful, strange house, and not much taken notice of, I expect, between meal times. You are all I have now, dearest, except Clara.

“Nothing very exciting has happened, though the greengrocer has got twin daughters. Just fancy — and only married a year! We are going to order everything now from them, even wood, for, though it is dearer, the bundles being smaller, I tell Clara we can be more careful. Dorothy says she does not mean to be, naughty girl, but I ask her how she would like others to treat her so if *she* had twins. A boy and girl too. One fair and one dark, as it should be.

“Mrs. Gray came to call yesterday, and her Maggie, who is really not at all silly as girls go, and so flaxen, is coming home soon, so I have been thinking it will be our duty to see a good deal of her. Clara hates the idea, but I feel we do not see enough young people, and you must miss it. Not that we ever did, but Rivers does, and the young men you meet. She has been a mother’s help in Paris, you know, so ought to be educated, and she walked miles every Sunday so as not to miss her church. There,

I have written two 'misses' on the same sheet, which you call slovenly composition, but your mother is not clever, dear, though she would wish to be that for her boy's sake, and all else too.

"If I have seemed resentful at any time, or as if I was terribly anxious, forgive me, Joel. The world, the flesh, and the evil one are so strong; it is not a desperate thing to fall, but it is not to rise again. There is not much fun for you at home, and those hours when you cannot quite get a plot right no doubt depress you. Shall we try to go oftener to really classical concerts? You do so appreciate the music, and surely I could too, with my big son to tell me when the best parts came?

"We are putting the old arm-chair from the parlour into your bedroom, and Clara has made cushions for the basket one to make it smart for visitors. To-morrow I shall line your wardrobe with some nice shiny holland, then the dust will not blow in so through the cracks. When you write tell me just how the Nutons behave to you, darling, or I shall imagine you are suffering in some way, and let me know if you would rather have a green, or a blue knitted tie next time? Clara says most of the fools she sees in fashionable streets have cerise. God bless you, Joel, and may He make life sweet to you — sweet and pure too, and not too grave. If you

and I have been less chummie of late, that is my fault, I expect, and do not forget I am sorry.

"Night-night, my baby. Hundreds of kisses to you, from

"MOTHER."

"P.S.—*Shan't* I be a peacock in the dust-cloak?"

Joel let the sheets lie outspread while he buried his eyes in his hands, thinking, realising many things that had not previously occurred to him. So mother knew, and yet didn't know, about Patty? That was why she had once let a whole six days go by without kissing him, and only relented grudgingly on the Sunday? That was the reason for certain tear signs, and a nerve-breakdown last autumn, after that jaunt of his cycling to Epping, when he had not returned until five in the morning. His being out all night had at last brought her dreads to a consummation. His hours, from eight to eleven at the Victory Inn, had not badly frightened her. And Patty *had* been on the Epping expedition, when they missed the last train, and had punctured tyres, and made a wild joke of it all. But Patty had remained demure enough to rob the situation of its peril. He knew now that he had regretted that. Ursula was making him straight with himself.

Poor little mother! Well, he would have some-

how to be a better boy to her; it was difficult to decide how, since he was a devoted slave, and extraordinarily tame, at present. The friendship with Ursula would be maddeningly difficult to reveal to her in the true light; she had but two methods of regarding attachment between young men and women, one benevolent, one shocked. Comradeship would be beyond her comprehension. And the idea that he might fall in love with a blind girl who was too high above him to be reached, would be almost as dreadful a fear as his intending to marry a blind girl he *could* make his wife. Then he caught sight of a scribble up in one corner of the first sheet.

“Do you think we could have a musical evening every first Saturday, from eight o’clock to ten? It would give you a little fun, and at your age you ought to meet people. I dare not suggest this to Clara till I have you to back me up, dear.”

That made Joel laugh aloud; the loving purpose was so clear. He was to be relinquished to matrimony, as his dear mother’s last possible sacrifice, that his morals might improve. But the laugh was not a sneer. It was almost a safety valve, because he felt uncomfortably emotional. What agonies of renunciation prospective must she not have gone

through, what deliberate decisions as to effacing herself for his consolation must she not have come to while lying awake, worried lest the Nutons had put him in a damp bed. There are some little chains, fragile as hairs to all appearance, that such a man as Joel Hunter is powerless to snap.

He went down to dinner with the tread of a socialist, yet political principles had nothing to do with the firmness and self-command; he knew he was as good as anybody, because he had Ursula for a confidant, and meant to be a loyal son to such a splendid little mother in the region of Chalk Farm. Though he blundered over the right fashion of helping himself to a mysterious dish — a matter that would have riled him abominably yesterday — he felt serene, and said "Thanks," quite pleasantly to Mrs. Langham who, rather officiously, put him right. When Vincent drew him into a discussion of Danish novelists he distinguished himself, and was not elated — a stranger fact, for him, than not being cast down by an error. He knew he talked brilliantly, and made the Nutons interested, for quite five minutes, in his actual personality, and yet he was not moved. Ursula was not present.

Norbys was an up-to-date establishment; there was a smoking-room, and a conservatory used for the same purpose, leading out of the drawing-room,

so nobody stayed in the dining-room after the meal. Directly he had managed to surrender Mrs. Langham to Ebbingstone and cigarettes he passed on to where the majestic chords of a Beethoven Adagio were coming from a piano. The pianist he had somehow divined was his friend.

With her face raised, her skin showing pale, yet rose-flushed, against the sombre outline of that cruel, kind shade, her lips changing in expression as she played, the gold glow from electric lamps colouring her white gown, especially the net folds about her beautiful neck and arms, how overwhelming a contrast she was to any woman he had ever met; how his heart swelled with pride at being, in a measure, hers. She was talking to another girl about the sonata and its meaning, interpreting the masterpiece by her voice as well as her fingers, and Joel lingered close, half regretful that she did not know he was there, half glad to see her as she was for others. After the girl left the neighbourhood of the piano, Joel still hesitated about speaking, for Ursula was playing a Chopin nocturne that he often stumbled through himself.

Out of the midst of the melody her voice came to him:

“Who is your favourite composer, Joel?”

“Brahms, those delicious Hungarian dances, that

let off moods — a certain Andante that subdues the wicked 'uns. . . . But I'll tell you all I mean about him some other time. How on earth did you know I was near? ”

It was glorious to hear her spontaneous laugh, of real girlish frolic and mischief.

“Are you the only person within ear-shot? ”

“Yes. The Duke is advancing. . . . Be quick.”

“I believe I should have known — I am so sure of your step already; but it's the soap, dear. Don't be offended; I like it. Sanitary soap, and no cosmetics. Did you bring it with you? ”

“Yes. Mother was afraid your scented stuffs would ruin my skin. Are you sure? ”

“Positive. Don't give it up. We must have some hours in the music gallery; and, before you leave, you shall show me the daffodils in the warren woods — show me with your eyes. It's rather creepy, about the dogs. I shall worry about your safety while you're shut up with the presents. Promise to take precautions against attack.”

“The study, without a crack of ventilation, feels an impregnable fortress.”

The Duke had come across the whole length of the ante-room; Joel let him approach closely, then, after a whispered, “I shall look for you to-morrow about nine,” left the field clear for the elder man.

Beyond thinking that it was a pity the study door only locked, had no bolts, as he shut it behind Sydney Crone, whose place he took, Joel dismissed the burglar question from his mind, as soon as Smith would keep silence. That ponderous custodian of Gwendolen's property was convinced that only the most astute care could possibly prevent a serious loss, probably in "full daylight." The poisoning of dogs could be carried out, in face of the staff at Norbys, almost in the presence of the family, so nothing but detective prowess—his own, chiefly—would meet the risks of the case.

"If them valuables was mine," Smith remarked, indicating the tables, screens and safe by one comprehensive gesture of a fat red hand, "I should put 'em in the Bank of England, and tell visitors to whistle for a sight of 'em. That's where pride costs so dear, thank the Powers; there's our pay, and Mr. Ransom Leadley's reputation to be laid out, all for the sake of displaying them things to whoever wants to gape. Why, it stands to reason as it's all evidence, so to speak, of the onus of being 'igh up in the public eye. Wealth's made for to enjoy, that's my theory; nobody admires money more nor me, but I'd use it for comfort, not scares. And Lord Ebbingstone shares my notion. Said so this very evening in the billiard room, where we had a drink to-

gether, after Mr. Vincent had been quarrelling with him upstairs."

"What was the shindy over?" Joel asked, with affected unconcern.

"His Lordship complained as he is treated like a dog himself — which I shouldn't like to deny off-hand, between you and me. There's been a bungalow built for him at Low Bay, to take Miss Gwendolen to when she's my lady, and, though it's a gift, it's been settled on heirs, the bridegroom having command of all during his lifetime, but not able to part with or mortgage. No — nor to let, without her leave. He swore he would go abroad at once, and postpone the weddin'. Mr. Vincent reminded him as his debts — which is considerable — won't get lifted off him at that rate. They made up the row, but I shouldn't be surprised if our young nobleman don't run off, after all, and let the creditors pine. He has plenty of spirit, sickly though he looks. Of course, I gave him the best advice — fatherly-like — to lie quiet now, and assert himself a bit later on, if he finds the Nutons heavy on him."

"We are the Nutons' servants, while we're here, not Lord Ebbingstone's," suggested Joel.

"No, we ain't; I work for Mr. Ransom Leadley, who's affable. This wouldn't be the first job I've had to stand up for myself over, not by a long chalk.

Nor the first one either by which I've made good friends."

"Isn't Mr. Vincent satisfied with our — er ——"

"Zeal an' energy?" put in Smith. "Not entirely, leastways he won't take any hints. I told him I required bolts on them doors. That was a week ago; and where are they?"

Joel grunted in response, went over to the lounge by the farthest window, turned up an electric reading-lamp that jutted from the wall, and put himself behind a review. Hours passed so, Smith perusing a novel, the assistant thinking over the most remarkable and blessed day he could recall. The friendship of Ursula meant separation from all the gratifications that he might have indulged in, had he been like other men, had he gone on becoming more like them. It appealed to chivalries that had never been called into action, in addition to those virtues which had kept him at home with mother and sister instead of in the lodging that he would have so vastly preferred. They had come to London, from the suburbs of a manufacturing town of the north, in order to "do" for him. When they were tired through overwork, or languid with the heat, or dull for lack of society, he knew he was the cause; Clara gave voice to the fact, his mother hid it, that was all the difference. They could have all lived more

cheaply apart, the women in a country cottage, perhaps taking a lodger, he managing in the city; but if he had sundered himself from them mother would have been struck the sort of blow from which her spirits could never recover. Toiling, economising, acting many parts for him made up her joy. Clara sometimes declared it was shameful to see her doing so much, but Joel knew better. If she had grumbled she would have freed him from the obligation of gratitude, but from the way she spoke anybody would have gathered that it was the nicest road, locality, house and life-task possible.

The appalling drabness, the wearing shifts, the unending make-believe, got on his nerves at times; the companionship of his folk was terribly monotonous, their talk jarred, their interests all seemed petty. He saw other men cutting adrift, sampling "life," and he had envied them passionately. The billiard-playing and rifle practice, with some cautious gambling now and then, had been his permitted indulgences that were the sops he flung his outraged manhood. Patty had not quite become another, except that he had been thrilled, out of the ordinary, by the unrespectability of lounging in her sitting-room, when the Inn was locked up for the night — just for the twenty minutes between closing hour and the "nearly half-past eleven" that his people thought

a shocking late home-coming. Patty must be got rid of — poor Patty! Yes, he felt a skunk when he remembered her kisses; the innovation that had seemed to mark such an exciting advance; but he knew they mustn't be repeated, that he wouldn't care for them if they were. Ursula, and all the higher aspirations, were to rule him now.

As the hall clock struck two a rap came at the door, and the head footman asked to be let in to bring some refreshment for the gentlemen, by Mr. Vincent's orders. Directly the door was locked again Smith began to help himself.

"Old port, as I'm alive; they do you well here. Dry biscuits go best with a wine like that."

Joel went back to his distant chair; he did not want to drink. He might have been ten minutes more with his recollections of Ursula and this marvel of her perfect cordiality, of the mutual wish that had created the friendship as overwhelmingly as a flooded river runs suddenly across acres of formerly dry land. He could not tell after what slight noise had first disturbed his thoughts, but he found himself springing up, alive to the necessity of action, then noticed that his lamp flickered out, the other lights too. A key turned in the lock — Vincent's warning came back to memory — there wasn't to be

any scandal. . . . Where was Smith? . . . Who else was in the pitch-dark room?

Slipping across the floor he thrust his hand on to Smith's shoulder to rouse him, but the heavy body gave no response, was sunk nearly double in the chair.

Then Joel groped his way by the table's edge to the safe. . . . Yes, a man had a minute lantern turned on the lock, was opening the last compartment, drawing out the inner safe that held the best jewels. Joel sprang at him, a hand to his throat; they struggled, and he saw Ebbingstone's pimply face for a second. . . . It was a close, furious grip, but what was happening to his ribs and lungs? Every breath was being squeezed out of him by this reedy boy he was despising as an assailant? . . . Ah, it was art against strength! . . . Joel reeled and fell, suddenly released. . . . A blow followed on his head. . . . He lay still . . . too sick and dazed to move.

Then the lock of the safe clicked, and his zeal made a last effort. He seized a small case of silver that was close to him, under the table, and, by a mighty effort, hurled it at the ceiling. . . . He would have cried out, but his lungs were weak still, and there was no one near. . . . Somebody slept above the

study. . . . The noise had been great? . . . That hope ended his brain work.

When he struggled back to consciousness Vincent was holding his head on one knee, and lights were lit. Sentences had to be repeated again and again, in the soft whisper, before they were understood. By then Joel could see they were alone, Smith excepted, the hunched-up, corpulent figure in the arm-chair. One window was unshuttered, stood open.

"I'll have to alarm the house," Vincent was saying. "Buck up, old man; pull your wits together. . . . You did capitally. The gems are safe. Ah, don't bother about that. . . . The vital point is *we don't know who the thief was*. . . . Can you grasp it? Not a breath against Ebbingstone."

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE CONSPIRACY

RAISINGS-UP and castings-down alternate fairly swiftly in most lives. Ursula, having revelled in the walk with Joel, in the find of this man to be her friend, this precious new person found herself at night bowed low under the sense of her uselessness. He was, perhaps, in danger, and she could not help him. He was lonely, and she might be no more than a sister. In the years before the blindness she had been admired, sought after, loved, had known her woman's power, therefore had meant to some day give herself whole-heartedly away. She had never imagined that being a sister was all she could offer as aid to the chief comrade when he appeared. It was complete love she had prepared for, deep in the recesses of a soul so proud and independent that it had to be taught to recognise the sublimity of self-surrender. So now, when she was drawn to Joel, as to no one else, she arrived faster than he could travel at the realisation of all it might mean, or have meant. There was no real pause for deliberate choice, though; he was he, she was she, and the irrevocable spell had been uttered.

The woman knew it first, as often happens, through her finer intuition; and the woman, in her limited conception of what passion is, fancied that to check the increase of love beyond a consoling kindliness, while the comfort of friendship was tested between two creatures of their age, would be perfectly easy. No, she was not afraid of giving Joel a sorrow: of course, he would be unable to "fall in love" with a blind girl, and, though she would fret against her load more for its new weight, her eagerness for the test was undeniable.

Night had often seemed her happiest surrounding, with its calm of silence and solitude, and the knowledge that darkness enveloped also those who could see; a blest ordinariness was hers again in the long hours when black skies veiled moon and stars. Now she felt stifled by the obscurity in which the world was lost, as, leaning from her bedroom window, she listened intently for any sound that might announce the approach of danger to the watchers in the study. It was finally a sort of angry contempt for her own defectiveness that sent her to sleep, after Vincent had begun to perambulate softly the upstairs corridor. She knew his step, lightly though he was treading. She was not nervous for him, glad that he was guarding Joel.

Directly she woke to a fresh day her thoughts were

for Joel once more. Springing out of bed she ran to the door, meaning to open it, and find out if her brother was still watchful or was awake in his room to answer whispered questions; she had forgotten that she must move slowly and cautiously, so blundered into the sharp corner of a wardrobe, and that bruise reminded her of all that blindness entails. All she dared do, lest she might be seen, was to lean into the passage and call "Vin" half under her breath. No reply came. Going to the dressing-table she felt the hands of her watch and from their position guessed that it was somewhere near waking time. She was nearly dressed when an elderly maid came to rouse her.

"Oh, Harriet, is everything all right?"

The old servant had received orders that she was not to alarm Miss Ursula.

"Nothing's been stolen, miss. There was an attempt, it seems, but the detective gentleman frightened the burglars away."

"No one hurt?"

"I didn't ask, but Mr. Vincent looked very cheerful when I saw him on the stairs, miss, just now, and he's ordered a picnic lunch for a party."

Two letters had come for the girl; Harriet told her they were from Madame, and Mr. Stephen, both from Cambridge. Ursula was about to ask her to

read Madame's aloud when she suddenly recollected that there was a new friend in the house. Joel should be her correspondent's interpreter. Armandine wrote in French, nearly in plain printing characters, when Harriet was not to understand — though the good old woman seldom mattered — then the spelling aloud was tedious. Armandine's son generally wrote in French, too, especially when he wanted money, but his sprawling words caused yet more difficulties.

Ursula had a contrivance for holding her note-paper, a rule, fixed in grooves, for regulating the spaces between lines, and for guiding her hand when she wrote. Laboriously she composed her first letter to Joel.

“Will you be eyes for me as soon as you come downstairs? I shall be in my sanctum.”

Harriet was sent to find out which man was waiting upon Mr. Hunter, and to arrange for the note being delivered, and, although the recipient had “a head on,” he declared he was able to obey the summons. Vincent, who had gone in with the valet to rouse the defender of the family honour and jewels, would not have inquired the meaning of the message, but was told, Joel relying on the girl's desire that the covenant of friendship should be made known to her people. Yet it was an anxious instant. Young

Nuton's suave smile and explanation came as a big relief to the man looking for opposition.

"She wants letters read, no doubt. It's always a solemn matter for her when folk write her their secrets, or she has any of her own to respect. The old Rector unfortunately died; Madame de Vert is usually a good substitute, loyal to a shade."

"An outsider, who can't . . ." began Joel, then stopped short.

"A stranger who has won trust at a bound," laughed the other. "You may not find your post of knight-errant to a crippled creature — poor child — altogether without hardship, Hunter. At the moment you ought to lie up. So shall I see her and suggest that, if my surmise is correct, she should send you the documents for inspection, and hear you read them by telephone? There's one at the head of your bed."

"Not on my account. I'll get dressed at once."

"Do you feel fit to deceive Ursula, for her sparing?"

"Must I?"

"Yes; Ebbingstone mustn't be shown up, and Ursie mustn't be upset on her sister's behalf."

"But she will have to know why the marriage won't take place."

There was the utmost tranquillity in Vincent's grey

eyes as, sitting by the bedside, he poured out tea from the miniature silver pot for the amateur detective, whose brow was red, black and blue.

“You overlook the point that Ebbingstone is head of us; be he what he may we shall make the best of him. His fortunes and ours hang together; we cannot shake ourselves free of my dead mother’s brother’s son. Reformation covers black with respectable grey in time, if not with white; the passage of years remodels the boy rake and spendthrift into a sober-going host. The histories of noted men furnish plenty of examples of the harm of hysteric abandonment of the vicious by the shocked. To quote Montaigne, ‘If Nature enclose within the limits of her ordinary progress, as all other things, so the beliefs, the judgments, and the opinions of men; if they have their revolutions, their seasons, their birth, and their death, even as cabbages, if heaven doth move, agitate, and rowle them at his pleasure, what powerful and permanent authority do we ascribe unto them?’ Without my sister for wife Ebbingstone will be likely to worse disgrace us.”

“But the woman’s lot? You don’t hesitate to . . .”

“The woman will not be coerced; her aim is the same as mine, or my father’s.”

Vincent reached out his hand for the cup and began to pour more tea.

"Beg pardon, I'm heckling you as though I had a right," said Joel, perplexed and antagonistic.

"So you have. We are immensely indebted to your cool-headedness last night."

"I was so jolly careful not to make a scandal that I nearly let the booty be carried off."

"The jewels were in an ordinary-locked trunk in my room, as at present: the inner safe was my device for preventing Bob's having actually any tell-tale stones in his possession. The young fool could have saved us all the plotting if he had owned about the . . . er . . . the other woman, and asked us to pay her off."

Joel passed his fingers across his forehead.

"Did you speak to me of the affair much before you put me to sleep? I can't remember; but the rest of the happening is clear, so Lord Ebbingstone hasn't destroyed my wits, I gather."

Nuton laughed.

"No; I put you off until I had discussed the tragedy with the person principally concerned — Gwendolen. Bob will be round shortly; I shall want you to assist at the conclave. You see, old man, your excellent physique was no match for his science

— Quaker upbringing, eh? But I got him under swiftly, and we had the tale told before you came round. The woman isn't his wife, as I feared she might be, but holds a proposal in writing that she obtained before she would set up housekeeping with him at Moseley. Gwen's ancestral jewels were to go to pay her. It's a dirty story, of the common type. The lad promised to settle down, and will, no doubt, when he has a wife and other interests, and his financial convenience depends on his decent conduct."

"It beats me how you can want a thief in the family."

Vincent rose, with a leisurely shrug of the shoulders.

"Most men thief, some lawfully, some against law. Few men are moral. All men are liars, as a great authority has assured us. And Bob is ours already. So I rely on your honourable reticence for the sparing of my younger sister, who regards life as romantically as you do."

"You shouldn't rely on any liar."

"Bravo; you fight well verbally, man of peace though you are. If you must wait on Ursula, I'll leave you to be got up, but Dr. Portal shall overhaul you later. Nonsense, I insist. You may as well part with your bruises, be they but all the ill for which you have to thank our Bob."

"Hang it all, I don't bear the chap any grudge personally. It's how you can counsel, or permit, a sister's marrying such a . . . a blot, that beats me. Granted she is cousin to him already, that's far off being his wife. As for your view, that there's not much to choose between men, that's a sordid species of cynicism when it leads to whitewashing the reputation of a youngster who has just escaped being sentenced for attempted . . ."

Vincent waved the sentence away.

"Doesn't *noblesse oblige*, truthfulness, in your opinion?" Joel went on, savage at the prospect of deceiving Ursula.

"The fates of many kings and queens would have been different, the development of nations changed, if nobles hadn't lied; and diplomacy is surely as legitimate an aid to private families as to royal lines."

Joel emitted a sort of groan.

"What tale do you expect me to make up, then. I may as well know."

"That you wrestled with a demon unknown, who entered, after switching off the light, by the use of keys, obtained from wax moulds taken by an accomplice, Lines, the second footman, who has disappeared."

That was news.

"Then if Lines is found . . ."

"Don't trouble about my share of the embroglio, Hunter. Lines won't be. We have him safe in hiding. Smith will follow a false scent. Poor old Smith! He was fully upset, when he reached a stage of convalescence a couple of hours ago, and saw himself a ruined detective for having drunk the doctored port."

"He believes the lie?"

"Of course. By-the-bye, I nearly floored the man who innocently brought you in the wine, imagining him to be Ebbingstone; they're about the same build. I was lurking in the upstairs corridor, ready to save the situation if possible. Concluding you had ordered light refreshment, I committed my one indiscretion — didn't suspect drugs. Lucky, after all, that you come of the good Quaker stock for which I have more respect than light words express."

"I'm not a teetotaller. But there are times for keeping cool, and in working order. It's fortunate that Smith doesn't know all — fortunate from your abominable standpoint, I mean."

It was a rude speech. Nuton merely gave his most amiable nod as he opened the door. Then he looked in again to remark:

"Yes, we are safer at your mercy, journalist though you are."

There was no time to reply; Joel lay still for a minute looking into the situation, wondering whether the being in his power hurt this apparently imperturbable aristocrat, or if the certainty of being served as he would was sufficient to remove any sting? For Joel knew the Nuton cause was made his own, disapprove it though he did, just by this courteous confidence in his integrity. All men are liars? Perhaps yes. At any rate, some men must lie, who feel they can ruin a family's desired hopes by telling truth, and must tell something. His mother, even, had dropped conscience overboard when she had married out of the Society of Friends. He hated falsehood himself, yet had prevaricated, time after time, about Patty and late hours. If he couldn't admire himself as truth's champion, how mean a deed it would be to flout Vincent Nuton's plans rather than lie again. Pharisaism could surely go no further? The still, small voice was, then, something of a farce, or at least here was another proof that the name of Christian mustn't be fought under? But he admitted that the loss of a definite creed, a table of the Law, resulted in chaos. A man was left to be his own judge as to the occasions upon which he would be straight, the persons to whom he would turn a crooked face. He had told Ursula she had made a wrong guess about the sunset, but he foresaw that

there might be other matters than this one of Bob's attempted crime upon which he would want to deceive her for her peace. If Gwendolen was to be sent, smiling, to such wedlock, her sister must not be allowed to grieve over the ghastly sacrifice. In that he was at one with the philosopher cynic who had just left him.

CHAPTER IX

FURTHER BOUND

URSULA's sanctum had none of the usual small ornaments, but had been cunningly arranged so as to give her all the comfort possible. Her favourite chairs ran on slightly sunk rails, between the thick rugs and mats, from chimney corner to window; one could be pushed out of the bay into the covered nook on the terrace, from there along the pavement, to gain sunshine or the trained magnolia's shade. Shelves of her ponderous books were all low, faced by a table ledge on which waited rests for the volumes she might wish to read, or keep open for reference. Her writing-desk and typewriter stand were furnished with every known aid to the fingers, and the machine worked almost silently except for its explanatory, soft-toned bells. Instead of pictures and photographs the walls held huge vases of lilac, heliotrope, and scented-leaf geraniums, in sunk niches. An aviary cage was full of tame birds of species unused to liberty. The majestic gray dog, Laird, kept guard over her and her property.

Speaking tubes could put her into communication at once with Harriet, who had a sitting-room near,

with Louise, the little French maid, with her father in the library, or Vincent in his den; a parcel lift ran up and down to her bedroom; various organettes and gramophones, of the best, were ready to amuse her, but she seldom used them, unless she grew weary of the piano pieces she knew by heart, or out of patience with her attempts at improvisation. At first she had needed guiding chords from the ceiling; now she could walk unfailingly to any part of the room, and handle any object. But, nevertheless, she was not used to blindness. The void hurt her so much that she had actually wanted the greater dimness of death, before Joel had put fresh colour into her denuded world; the awful mystery of sightlessness seemed often to deepen the terror of temptations against faith in the beneficent Overseer of men and women. The old Rector had helped her, but he was gone himself to penetrate the mists of the other side of the grave. She was so good — so anxious to cling, in proper, childlike confidence, to the hand of God, that when she was passing through a period of spiritual desolation she felt wicked, forgetting that by such ordeals faith is proved. It was never rebellion against her lot, only misery because of the loss. The physical effect of living in a dense cloud was, in her case, a passionate impulse to struggle — not to sit quiet under the irremediable state. She was a finely-

fashioned, fully vital creature, with neither body nor spirit adapted to contentment in a little, uneventful part. It was the aliveness of her face that struck Joel anew as she came, at her long stride, over the floor to greet him that morning.

The two hands she gave him, that he held firmly, were warm, velvety, and full of pulses. It passed through his mind that she could be impetuously wrong as well as eagerly kind, that it would be dreadful to offend her. And that was the type of woman of which he had always dreamed.

"You have had a blow, Joel, Vincent says 'a nasty knock.' Are you sure it's not serious?"

"A day or two will see the thing cured, and, thank heaven, you can't discover what a guy I am, with a knob of many tints above one eye."

"May I feel?"

"Certainly."

Her finger tips travelled gently about all the brow, and he knew she found the bad place by the tender lightness of the touch then; they lingered upon one ear, went up again, felt the bar of his eyebrow, the nose outline of which he was secretly proud, traced the upper lip, and the mouth and chin.

"Did it hurt?"

"It soothed," he answered, but his voice had a queer tremor that he was afraid she might notice, and

attribute to pain. "Do you know what sort of a chap I am now?"

The whimsical smile that he delighted to raise showed as she replied:

"Yes; you've a grand jaw, haven't you, but the mouth is easy-natured, counteracting any fierceness, and you possess a profile that might be coveted. You were described to me once, as 'lean, muscular, with a scrubby brown moustache.' I liked that picture, but I am better satisfied now that I can fancy you as you are. Wait one minute — let me see how your hair grows; why, how unusually thick it is, and I feel any number of waves, especially at the back of your neck! Please, what colour are your eyes?"

"Suggestive of cigars."

"May I make a criticism?"

"It would help, and you're Ursula, you know, my chum."

"God bless you, yes! . . . Well, dear, I don't want you to get smart, but a straight, rather high collar would suit your long, broad neck so much better than that one with turned-down corners, the sort that city clerks always wear. You are more of a man than the typical city clerk — that's why."

"I'll get a fresh collar outfit next time I go out, if the village can supply it, unless . . ."

"Oh, that will be as well for us as walking the

fields, for there's a lovely way into Abbeyvalley, but we must drive there; Vincent says you are to be nursed up, and he relies on my helping restrain you. Your leave is extended already; he has arranged that with Mr. Leadley."

Something buzzed in Joel's heart that he couldn't interpret, something that might, of course, be due to Ebbingstone's fist, made his brains momentarily in commotion as he led the girl to the settee in the sunshine by the open window, placed her where the cold draught could not reach her, patted the Great Dane, and then asked, in the tone of a man come into some kingdom:

"I gladly submit, but make me useful. What are my eyes to do for you immediately?"

"Read these letters aloud."

Did he know French? Yes; and the British accent was only British, not ignorant. She liked the simplicity of his obedience, without any reluctance, the business-like, yet sympathetic phrasing, the way in which he gave the sheets to her one by one, as they were finished, and instantly spoke of the wide subject of how she must miss Madame de Vert, betraying no curiosity, no surprise, either at the mother's ecstatic eulogies of her brilliant, noble boy, Stephen, nor at that boy's decidedly cringing appeal to Ursula to save him once more, and he would never asked again.

"Yes, Dina is a darling; you will see that for yourself when she comes back. Stephen is her all. She had the finest of husbands, a rich man who spent all but a meagre income upon righting the condition of tenants who had been ill-housed and ground down, father and sons, fathers and sons, through centuries. Then, just as he had entered Parliament, was taking up the cause of other landowners' 'serfs,' as he called them, he caught typhus, in a slum, and left her to bring up Steve to complete his work. She venerates that sly, idle, pleasure-seeking lad of twenty, not for his own sake, but through a mad conviction that his father's qualities must live in him. And he has taken pains to cherish her ideal. He is clever, quite an orator already, fond of posing as the friend of the poor. It is to me he shows his other side, and he knows I couldn't bear to kill my dear Dina's hopes."

"Surely you aren't competent to do battle with him at his age? In the school-boy days, perhaps, but not now?"

Ursula sighed.

"It's getting rather difficult. But I am a woman of my world, Joel; I steer clear of priggishness. I don't preach, except on the texts that should rouse ambitions of the best. There isn't anything for Steve to hold on to, now that he has learnt the jargon of 'nothing matters to the Maker Who has a

use for immorality, for fraud, for sickness, and cruelty, in the blend of the world's evolution.' That was how he — the lad — spoke, when he came here last: 'It's all rot, Ursula, making out that the tame life's the best. The more one does and sees the more one knows, and clerics invented sins. Altruism's the good I want, not self-crucifying without motive.' And my arguments, based on the law of purity and love, the Christ-faith, only appeal now, Joel, to those who have something of a personal loyalty to the Master, who have been sure, at one time or other, of the coming down of the Spirit. Steve asks, with the mob, 'Wasn't this Man a carpenter's son?' Unluckily, Dina asks it too."

Ursula was always surprising Joel. He saw the depths in her now, and human excitement died down.

"Galilee is out of fashion. Yes, you're right; one has to have heard the far-off voice, gained some intimacy that disobedience can't destroy. Then one mayn't call oneself a decent Christian; one probably drops behind, but there's something to discern ahead. What does Madame think will lead on her boy? "

"Inherited nobility, the desire to be spent in the service of others. At present Stephen only talks big about his generous views, and practises public speaking. He means to develop his character by knowledge, but of pleasure, not of suffering. Joel . . ."

“Yes?”

“When I feel that too, when I hate my cross, the thought of Steve, wallowing in vice, is my quickest cure. For it is *my* fastidious way, his vicious method, of rebellion. There’s not much to choose between them. Oh, understand — don’t be polite.”

Joel was silent a few seconds, but he took her fingers in his clasp, until he apologised.

“I beg pardon, my hands are awful rough; such a contrast to yours. I do see your theory; I can’t deny its justice; though the grosser temptings don’t come near some folk they can be tested in other styles, and are. You should hear my mother talk of that; it’s one of her pet subjects. She goes about looking for people’s individual trials, and pitying them for bad times caused. Can I be any cure too, Ursula? I mean, will having this friend mitigate the circumstances a trifle?”

It was the girl’s turn to hesitate. How she wished she could assure him that their comradeship would reconcile her more to her fate. But already it smote her hard. She had taken a different hold of her cross, so that it gave more pain, but she was greedy for the weight. So contradictory is love.

“I’m grateful for you; you can’t guess *how* grateful,” she told him.

He was inwardly raging against the tragedy of her lost eyes. She spoke again:

"If I hand you gold and notes for the sum, can you send Stephen a cheque for me?"

"Yes; will you let him have it all, and at once?"

"Money doesn't matter," she said, and the remark sounded pathetic to the man who was poor. "The one thing that torments me is having a secret from Dina; if she ever asked me if Steve writes, or hears rumours of his extravagance, so guesses that I find funds, I shall have to tell her the truth, and it will break her heart. Don't smile, Joel; I can't see if you do. She lives for his nobility, not for him; she would much rather he died than disgraced his father's name."

"I wasn't amused, dear. I know a deal about mothers. So you would speak the true word at all costs?"

"Of course. Could I ever trust any one if I were false myself? Oh, that's a selfish thought, but it came to my lips. Blind women, by the way they depend, know that there's nothing so ——"

"May I disturb the conference?" called Vincent, entering slowly. "I want Hunter to join us in the library. Bob's most anxious to see him."

Joel was hurried off, being instructed *en route*; he

learnt that Bob had been patrolling the garden last night, helping guard the gifts, had come on the scene just too late to catch the burglar, whose escaping feet had left enormous prints of nailed boots in the flower-beds. Bob had positively caught a glimpse of his face, having flashed a pocket torch at him.

Lord Ebbingstone stretched out a hand sheepishly as Joel entered the room.

"Sorry, old sport. I couldn't avoid doing you a mischief," he murmured.

The apology was accepted; Mr. Nuton formally thanked Mr. Hunter for all that he had done. Vincent announced that the detective work was to be left to Smith, who had wired for three more assistants and was superintending the fixing of bolts to the door. Perhaps it was no wonder that Joel felt dizzy, bewildered, trapped. He found himself being held over Bob's head as a threat. At any time, if the Nutons chose, the witness of the attempted theft might be brought forward.

"I'm d—d if I know what more you want," growled Ebbingstone, who was invariably reduced to sulkiness by opposition. "I'd have told you the whole game ages back, if I hadn't wanted to stick to Gwen. Suppose I'd taken the beastly rubies, what then? She'd never have known the necklace was made

up of shams; she'd have been all serene, and got the same credit for it. And we'd have baulked this nasty show."

The nephew was sternly admonished by the uncle, cleverly humiliated by the cousin, then sent into the drawing-room to be forgiven by Gwendolen.

"Pledge your word of honour—you hold it cheap, I know—that when these extensive . . . gambling debts . . . are paid you will reform," were Vincent's last words of exhortation as he pushed the younger man from the library into the hall.

Joel turned round quickly, ready to assert his own view at last, for the saving of Ursula's sister.

"You've wound me up in a tissue of lies, but I believed your . . ."

"Calm down, old man," interrupted young Nuton, genially. "The bride has heard the whole facts, and is willing to let the bridegroom down easy. They will start on more favourable terms if Bob believes that she hasn't condoned the woman part of the business."

"It's a sickening enough job in any case."

"You express our own shame, Hunter," said the "Squire," with such dignity that Joel repented.

"I mean I wish you weren't so good to the rascal, sir."

"The son of my wife's elder brother, the head of

us, in a sense. We accept the burden of the tie; we did not create it. The ill-formed lump of clay that has just left us to discuss him must not be cast into the ditch, for the reproach of all men, but be carved anew, till fitted for its legitimate place."

Joel was very curious as to how Gwendolen would look when she had to encounter him — the man who knew. He need not have wondered. She eyed him quizzically.

"Bob had better atone, when you're recovered, Mr. Hunter, by giving you lessons in self-defence. He's somethin' of a champion."

"Thanks, no. I'm not likely to need the art among my ain folk."

"You'll never escape our set again, not for ages anyway. Ursie wants you, and you seem ready to help us spoil the dear child. Here she comes. I was explaining to Mr. Hunter that he's become one of the family, by his kind efforts on its behalf."

Ursula looked so tall, beside her plump and shorter sister, so true, and sweet, and innocent of worldliness, as she smiled up at the man, that he was thankful he was in the conspiracy to shield her, even by deceptions.

"Gwen is so glad her beautiful baubles are safe. And she is going to help me take care of you. No more work for you; you're just our injured guest."

CHAPTER X

DAFFODILS

THE man of no account had leapt into favour; the hard worker was at rest; the town dweller was surrounded by fairest country, and the dreamer about women was taken care of by his best dream. Ursula made him her charge, while he was eyes for her; among the guests he ranked as a hero, wounded in defence of jewels. Mr. Nuton invited him to browse among his books, first editions not excepted; Vincent taught him to play golf; Gwendolen enlightened him as to the ways of her world, and teased him for attempting to write fiction when he knew so little of fact. From morn to late night he was admirably treated, luxuriously housed, fed and entertained. Nobody snubbed him, his clothes did not seem to matter.

It was not strange that his independent feelings became less pronounced, that he modified some of his rancour against display. There were moments in which he found himself almost as anxious as the Nutons that the Nuton family should be maintained in all its ancient comeliness. A luncheon and dinner party introduced him at once to Ebbingstone's lands,

castle, and mother and sisters; demonstrations of cousinly affection taught him how the two families were really as one already, and the exact barriers were pointed out which would be removed from between the acres when Gwendolen bought a title. If he still knew that the affair was odious he was no longer astonished by Gwendolen's willingness. She knew so much of the modern-smart-man character that when she said, with her languid drawl, and lazy laugh, "Bob's no worse than most of 'em, and I'll have the upper hand with him," the sentiment did not jar as once it would have done. The gay folk all knew now that Joel had come to Norbys as amateur detective; that the journalist introduction of him, though correct, had been a subterfuge; therefore their interest in him grew, their amiability rose. The iron-mongers' clerk who wrote was a more esteemed person than a sarcastic-looking young man who had been picked up, goodness knew where, and required them to admit him into their circle. Joel now was just the same, but his brusque speeches were not resented, indeed he heard them repeated, often with additions, as instances of uncultured genius. The great folk would go their ways and forget him; meanwhile he did as well to amuse the house-party as a tame bear, or other queer imported animal. Not being any fool Joel saw what they thought of him long before their

congregation broke up. It happened that Ursula's other pupil, the village yokel organ player, was had in one night to perform one of his own compositions after dinner, and served as an object lesson to the temporarily enthroned protégé of the crowd. He did not care. To Ursula he knew he was unique. It was during the last three days of his fortnight, when all the guests had gone, that he was most blissful.

The wedding had been postponed; that twenty-ninth of February could not become the anniversary date after all, because the "other woman" was proving difficult to deal with, and lawyers were almost at their wit's end to discover how to induce her to sign the document freeing Bob from all danger of a breach of promise action. Society was told that the legal business involved such enormous settlements that the marriage could not take place for some weeks. Any lie did, as the bride remarked, since nobody imagined anybody would believe it. Often Joel and Ursula inhabited a world to themselves, in the midst of the whirl, or as part of the family; they both knew that life for them was their newly-found sympathy, the spell of love that they forbore to call by its right name. Joel had not the slightest notion that he would never want to marry any girl but Ursula; Ursula knew perfectly that Joel was the one man she

could have taken, but for her blindness. It did not occur to her for even a sublime second that she might take him all the same.

They had seen all the country together, read poetry, made music, been out under moon and stars, sketched their life histories for each other — she, leaving out the great wish with which she had grown up, he omitting mention of Patty. So now they felt they knew a tremendous lot about each other. When Ursula talked about sincerity, as the one virtue that meant all, at least to her, Joel shivered. But directly she spoke, a trifle anxiously, about Bob's odd tempers, and none-too-pleasant language, Joel hastened to whitewash the youth's reputation, just as Vincent would have done.

"You do think Gwen is deliciously happy?" came the question, one day.

"Ebbingstone is . . . er . . . everything to her," was the answer.

The subject of the attempted burglary had been discussed *ad nauseam* by them all; every local caller renewed it; village constables came up and interviewed Joel respectfully; Smith fetched Ransom Leadley himself down from London to investigate on the spot; a description of the burglar was posted up, supplied by Bob; a reward was offered for information as to the suspicious characters who had been ob-

served in the neighbourhood that night; a tramp or two had to be interrogated and inspected; footprint measurements taken; experts studied thumbprints on the window frame; Joel had to repeat his circumstantial lies so often that he could have half believed them himself. From the path of falsehood, and the Nutons' confiding gratitude, he passed into Ursula's innocent presence. It was horrible, but the conspiracy of sparing the blind girl was somehow contagious. He caught himself deceiving her on his own account once or twice, hiding her blunders, and, the words once uttered, he could not unsay them, no matter how swift his repentance. So it came to be the last day of his fortnight. To-morrow he would be back in the neighbourhood of Chalk Farm, leaving it for Whitechapel next morning, returning to it in the evening. Leisure time then would be spent in taking mother and Clara to a picture show probably, for nothing would induce him to go at once to the club which was run in conjunction with the Victory Inn.

To-day Joel had read and answered Ursula's letters, taught her some of his favourite Brahms' Andante, note by note, gone with her into Abbeyvalley to help her shop; now, after lunch, they set off upon a tea picnic expedition that Vincent had suggested.

"Make the best of your last hours together; es-

cape the prosaic, as we represent it," the brother had advised, with his unfailing tolerance of the comical friendship.

"Ah, youthful romance at twenty-nine!" laughed Gwen, as the two left the house at their magnificent stride, Joel carrying a flat basket strapped over his shoulder, Ursula swinging a box that held cakes.

"Poor devil," said Vincent, in his gentlest tone.

"He has benefited by the privilege," commented the father.

Long before the pair reached the lanes Joel was telling her, for the twentieth time at least, some of the subtlest ideas within his novel, making the characters real, though wrapping them in all the glamour of love that the born writer gives to bad and beautiful alike. For, to the man who makes fiction because he can't bear not to, there are no thorough villains, just as there are none in actual life. Only the hack writer paints incarnate sin dead, black horror.

Of course Ursula believed in the book. That was easier for her than it might have been, in consequence of its containing a mother for a heroine, and no love idyll.

"I believe I ought to have made him marry Olive, and *then* find out that there's something glorious he has missed, the very something he has always doubted, so wouldn't wait or search for."

"No, no. Olive has the love on her side, remember, pure, strong, and so invincible; if he didn't care at first she would make him, as his wife. You must keep to the old plan; let him tire of her before marriage, shirk the tie that will oblige him to put up with a woman's constant presence. His selfishness will be his punishment after he has learnt what he has missed; he wouldn't have been such a satisfactory son if he had been forced to put up with his absolutely duckie mother's little tiresome ways daily; he will want them too, one and all, when she is dead, and he sees that the least, as the greatest, sprang out of her uncomplainingness and self-effacement. It's the mark of genius, Joel, that showing how Mrs. Munro was uninteresting to him, and others, through her sinking her own personality in deference to his tyranny."

He laughed.

"*My* mother despises Jim's; when we have an argument she often warns me, 'I'm not a Mrs. Munro, dear. I've my fixed opinions.' And then she is usually on the brink of giving in."

"Some day I must know Mrs. Hunter. I shall just dote on her. Bring her with you some weekend."

There was a period of hesitation that was not misread. The girl knew he was not a snob.

"I should be afraid for her. The kindness wouldn't make up to her for the atmosphere; her sense of right would be doing battle all the while, against the . . . the ease. She has more temper than I've told you; it would flare up if she had to listen to the anecdotes told at table. You flushed last night when Lady Nelly gave us the plot of a play; you squeezed your hands awfully tight together once. Do you recollect?"

"Over Bob's description of somebody's record. Joel, I could have sworn that he had been drinking."

"Most boys of his set do until they are well taken in hand."

"Yes, I suppose so. At least, I told you that myself. You often adopt my worldly wisdom. For Gwen's sake he will surely steady? They *are* real lovers, aren't they?"

"They'll be a most firmly attached couple. But this is our last afternoon, Ursula, a brutal 6.30 express is going to hurl me where you aren't, and to ugliness unspeakable; let's forget other folk. You haven't told me enough about all you're planning to do."

March had brought a first volume of spring; the air smelt of bursting buds, the birds were singing of courtship, and boughs grew more ruddy every instant as the sunshine warmed their veins.

Ursula knelt down in a field, and held her ear to the ground.

"Grasses can only whisper yet, Joel, but their speech has improved since yesterday. By and bye they will have almost stridently whistling trebles, after the rhythmic, mature stage, just as old voices are thin and shrill, following full tones, and baby lisps. I wonder if the river gurgles in changed keys. I must find out, and write to tell you."

"Thank God Madame won't have to see your letters to me," cried Joel piously. "I shall send you stiff scrawls, the result of trying to be harmlessly unemotional and a fine penman, for her edification."

"I'll not forgive you if you do. I'd rather you wrote as you speak, even to the occasional 'Oh, you darling,' or 'Best chum.' Don't we both hate shams? Haven't we agreed to be unswervingly true? Our knowledge of what friendship means must keep us living it out boldly before everybody. See how father, Gwen, and Vincent understand it. People are always respectful to the real. It's my biggest treasure that I've ever chosen. The blind woman's comfort. You will have other joys some day, Joel, then you shall write a novel with love and marriage for the theme. And I . . . well, I shall be your wife's friend too."

"My salary won't keep up two homes; not when I get a rise either."

"Your books shall bring you a fortune."

"That sort of thing's getting rare. No, Ursula, I shan't encourage mother's renunciatory yearnings. The musical evenings aren't to come off, and Mrs. Gray may keep her Maggie who is so flaxen and not silly as girls go. My chum, I can't see myself settling down with a Maggie, were I in a position to pose as her Cophetua. A thinking career is my lot, I guess. But I'll keep you posted up in all that happens, if the notion of Madame will let me."

His hand held her still, then took the box from her, lowered her on to the grass and moss of a woodland bankside. She felt around, and gave a cry:

"Oh, daffodils!"

As the man watched her fling herself among them, first on one knee then on the other, bathing her sightless face in the cool, gray spears, letting the swaying buds brush her temples, touching full-blown yellow blossoms with her lips, he was torn by a fury of regret, that he thought was all for her. She was no pale, delicate creature, but a tall, nobly-formed girl; her nature called out always for activity, her courage was high, her ambitions surely had been generous? In that instant he came near to the dreams that she had known, of which she had not spoken. It seemed

cruel, vile and shameful, that she was here meekly on her knees, trying to gain some solace from the touch of flowers.

Perhaps she divined some new growth of love in him, for she lifted her face then, and smiled.

“I’m lucky! Last daffodil season I hadn’t my man pal.”

CHAPTER XI

MOTHER

WHILE Joel was among the daffodils with Ursula his mother dabbed a too bright yellow brown paint on the cracks in the window-frame, and the chips of the skirting board, of his bedroom, sadly disturbed in her mind because, though the enamel was warranted to dry in a few hours she never believed advertisements or tin-labels, and even if he did not get his coat sleeves or trouser legs damaged, the odious smell might continue. Clara had said, "What's the sense of minding the look of paint blisters?" when the renovation had been suggested, had delayed the operation by ordering the wrong colour, and now laughed noisily when, passing the open door, she saw the artist lying almost prone beneath the bed.

"Better pull it out, instead of risking apoplexy."

"My dear, you know quite well that it's all tied up with string, to prevent its breaking down again under the poor boy."

"Whose weight has probably increased through living on the fat of the land."

"You forget he has been in pain."

"A headache or two. Trust a man to make a

fuss. And he'd be continually getting knocked down if he were half a man. In a couple of years or so we women will be more muscular mortals than our brothers, then perhaps we shall get our rights. Brute force has governed the globe too long."

"Then why cultivate it?"

"Oh, don't go in for political argument, mother; you're not likely to shine at it as you do over cakes and puddings. I've sat staring at the custard for the best part of an hour, and now it's gone watery. Chop it up into glasses, then his lordship won't observe."

"Oh, Clara? And I put in such a nice lot of noggins. Have you got the cigarettes, as you promised?"

"I changed my decision. It's abominable for Joe to burn up all that money; I've put it in the box where I'm collecting for girl waifs; it's broken-lidded; I'll tell him he can take the sum back if he isn't too ashamed."

The painter crawled from under the bed, her still daintily pretty face red with the exertion, drew herself up to the full five foot something, absent-mindedly patted the fair-gray coils that formed a mound on the apex of the well-set head, and surveyed her daughter through tears.

"Haven't you *any* desire to help your brother

find happiness in his home? Girl-waifs, indeed! They're all very suitable for unattached women to save and work for, but no good ever comes from the charities that. . . . Ah, don't you understand what I mean? You're not a child; hasn't it struck you that millions of young men wouldn't put up with . . ."

Eloquence failed again; she had spied out another white yawning dent in the door panel.

Clara chuckled.

"With bilious yellow paint? Let him pine for his top-note friends if he must; you bet they'll not bother to ask him down again once they've tipped him handsomely and got him off. It's the thought of *how* handsome that tip is sure to be that made me bolt out of the tobacconist's without buying. As for Joe's morals, don't you worry to inquire into them; there's no call to show up a son or a brother, thank goodness, and I'll never trouble you to find out the vices of a probationer son-in-law."

Mrs. Hunter was pale now, her skin — once called rose-leaf — did change rapidly in tint; her mouth — once named Cupid's bow — had a habit of tightening the lips into a thin line, when she was doing her very best to retain a secret or preserve temper. Clara, spectacled, black-eyed, and clumsy of figure, was moving away, but came back to add a parting shaft.

"Joe's a nice boy as they go. Now we're beginning to understand them we can be thankful for small mercies. I'd have bought him a bunch of violets for his desk, but I happened to see the *War Cry* being sold at the corner where the 'buses start."

"Why did you want the *War Cry*?" asked the mother, rather eagerly, hoping that some sort of religion was dawning in her child.

"I don't know that I did want the thing. But it's a fine fighter, you know."

The dent in the door had to wait while the painter, stroking the bed-quilt automatically, pondered the agitating puzzle whether Clara and the charwoman had been talking. For the girl seemed to speak more personally of men's morals than she had ever done before, having generally a preference for wide statements; and Mrs. Judd's voice had sunk to a whisper once or twice downstairs. The tears that had gathered did not trickle down — Mrs. Hunter's seldom did allow themselves that luxury — but they made the forget-me-not blue behind them exceedingly pathetic. She was a woman without a confidant, as thoughtful, proud, earnest, elderly women mostly are. Loquaciousness on affairs of real import belongs to the years before the self-engrossedness of other persons has been realised. The indifference that kind-heartedly tries to be interested, the dutiful,

or at least ethical, sympathy that can solace itself but no one else, is not sought when gray hair has brought the painful wisdom that hugs silence.

The serpent and the dove lived together in Patience Hunter. She was a shrewd distruster of acquaintances, down to the milk-boy, but a tender lover of her "ain." An extraordinary amount of motherly pity hovered around Clara day by day, especially night by night, because she knew "the poor dear child is so unattractive." Memories of her own demure youth, of glances met and exchanged coming and going to meeting, of the joy of looking in a mirror, of hopes that brought a blush but could end in prayer to a Father who would have friends wed; the knowledge that to-day "wicked old men" smiled at her in the street, because of the undying youth in her profile, her slender figure, and "ladylike" walk; above all, recollections of romance lived fully, softened the mother's vexation with the daughter who was not fair. She told Joel once: "You ought to be more chivalrous than to get angry with poor Clara's wild views." Then she had doubted if the tacit allusion to Clara's drawbacks had not been cruel.

But Clara must not criticise Joel. He was somehow sacred. A sinner?

"We are all sinners," murmured the little woman, rising to dab on more paint.

"We *are* all sinners," she repeated more emphatically, as, dusting the bookshelf, she slipped "that dangerous Rossetti" behind Pascal, whom she considered respectable, though peculiar. Her assertion, whispered in the empty room, sounded like an instruction to the Maker, a notification that it was really no use for Him to look hardly upon her boy. She would have been sincerely shocked if anybody had told her she was wont to dictate to God about Joel, yet all mothers err so for loved sons. To Joel himself she knew she could be "rigid as iron." Hadn't she once refrained entirely from kissing him during five miserable days? Mechanically she refolded the last aired and mended flannels in the drawers, examined the row of boots in the cupboard to see if any wanted repairing, peeped into the luminous matchbox, blew imaginary dust off the portrait of his father, and stamped on the new Japanese red mat by the writing-table, because the edge would roll up. Then she went to the kitchen, pursing up her lips, to see if the kettle boiled. Mrs. Judd was singing as she perfunctorily scrubbed the scullery. Her songs always got on Patience Hunter's nerves, and this ditty was extra objectionable.

"No, Nance, you ain't no beauty,
With your 'aughty eye of gray,
But you've a mint of money,

That's why I rode away,
An' left a humbler lassie,
Ter rue a bitter day."

"It would be worth while if you sang some beautiful hymn, not that musical-hall nonsense," said the employer severely.

"There's a moril in it, blest if there ain't. You arsk Mr. Joel when 'e comes in. P'raps, though, he'll 'ave got too grand ter be spoke to, among all the 'arf-dressed ladies. That Mrs. Langham's name down as being returned from Norbys Priory, I see'd it in 'Latest Inklings,' an' she's got out of three divorce cases by the skin of 'er teeth, so ter speak. Not that she's a 'usband now, but others 'ave."

"I didn't know," faltered the mother. "I can't think how you hear such a deal about society, Mrs. Judd."

"I reads," answered the charwoman, with pride. "Tom, 'e says ter me, only yesterday, 'Sall, my gurl, what you don't know of the aristocracy wouldn't fill a brass thimble.' 'No, lad,' I says back, 'and it ain't only *their* ways as I'm up in.' With that 'e went out double quick time. For 'e's for ever loafin' round Miss Dewey's barmaid, same as Mr. Joel loafs round 'er mistress."

"Don't, *don't*, Miss Clara is only in the parlour! Now tell me the truth. You haven't been so disloyal

as to breathe a word of this slander that is afloat to her, have you?"

Mrs. Judd stood erect, clamped down her pail and, finding her vision confronted by slices of rich cake on her tea plate, smiled broadly, shaking her head.

"Not me. But slander's not the word for gospel truth, mem. Don't I know all the staff of the Vic'try familiar, an' isn't it as much as their places is all worth put together for them ter come near the office, as Patty calls 'er back room, when Mr. . . ."

"You shall *not* say it," cried the listener, flinging a hand over the amazed woman's mouth. "Eat the cake I've made for his home-coming and remember that suspicion is the . . ."

"Mother," shouted Clara, "I don't want any tea. I'm going to sell tickets for the lecture on 'The Rights of Wives.' Sit down and rest soon. You've slaved enough for our domestic tyrant."

"Yes, you do give over now," put in Mrs. Judd, mollified by the cake of which her mouth was full. "If Patty — Miss Dewey, I should say — 'asn't got anythin' in writin' she can't bring it up against 'im."

When the house was her own once more, Mrs. Judd sent off further propitiated by cake in her pocket, the mother went back to Joel's bedroom, in which she had sat frequently since his absence. From the parlour arm-chair, now made over to him,

behind turned Venetian blinds that permitted the street to be watched, she gazed mentally, as well as she could, into this dear prodigal's future. Either he had offered marriage to Patty, or he was quite hardened to sin. But, for all Patience Hunter's love of virtue and belief in the necessity and efficacy of repentance, she was not intending to press this particular point upon him. There must be extenuating circumstances; no doubt the duty lapsed in this case because Patty was a baggage. Joel had not answered the important parts of any letters sent him at Norbys Priory; all he had replied, that savoured of regeneration of spirit, was that he would have loads of things to talk over, "in our own half hour," upon his return. That meant half-past ten to eleven at night — when he was in. Clara was always in bed then, unless prosecuting some out-door crusade. "We cannot meet as before; he will know I want to see into his heart, to be forgiven for having seemed stern," mother told herself, sitting with clasped hands in the drab little top room under the roof.

A racketty piano in a house opposite was sending forth strains of Offenbach; the Church Brigade band had set up an opposition hymn tune round the corner of Ellen Road; a coster's cart trundled along the

gutter, grating the curb, a cry of, "Banarners, two a penny," was bringing children to gates, and heads to windows. The sun had disappeared from London — though he shone still for the daffodil gatherers in the Warren Woods — gray evening was dropping over the terraces of mean, small houses. But with her lips trembling into a smile, Mrs. Hunter told herself:

"It isn't every Primrose Hill look-out is as pleasant as this. Why, the avenue trees will be green soon, and there are buds swelling on old Bennet's lilac. My Joel ought to be able to love his home. The best chance for a literary man is a quiet room. And this wicked Mrs. Langham — if she is wicked, poor creature — may have shown him what comes of breaking faith with the Almighty."

After some fumbling in a giant, flat pocket stitched on a petticoat she drew forth her cherished book, and made another dot in pencil on the title page. The printed words had each their bodyguard of private marks, signifying resolutions.

"Extracts from
The Minutes and Epistles of the Yearly Meeting
of the
Religious Society of Friends,
held in London
From Its First Institution to the Present Time."

She turned the pages to the chapter most often studied, the one headed, "Counsel to Parents, etc."

"I hope I can suffer for him, if punishment must be borne," she was thinking. "I've always prayed I may die beautifully somehow, whether it's sudden or slow, that I mayn't linger to be repulsive. I should mind that more than pain. . . . But if it's necessary for my boy's sin to be atoned for still — more than it was on Calvary (oh, not more — but by some one only human) — I take back all those petitions. I'd have . . . yes, I would . . . even cancer in the face — to save him from being hurt."

She read a passage that was printed just as accurately in her mind.

"But never forget that it should be your care to act that example of a humble Christian, which so beautifully enforces the pure precepts of the gospel. Your own mind must be seasoned with grace and your labours will only be effectual as they are carried on and blessed by the power of the Spirit of Christ. If in the discharge of this duty discouragements should arise, let not these become a source of dismay. . . . The safe ground on which parents can proceed is so to walk and wait before the throne of grace, as to be enabled to pour forth their secret prayers for the blessing of the Most High. Then,

instead of looking back with bitter regret, if their beloved offspring should deviate from the path of Christian virtues, they may commit their cause with conscious integrity to Him Whom they have desired to serve."

"I am not humble enough, I'm worldly," she admitted. "I must have the dust-cloak now I've made such a show of delight about it, and I do feel I must keep up appearances — but I won't buy that bonnet."

Quite unconsciously, acting according to custom, she went to the dressing-table looking-glass, and rearranged the row of prim, little, natural curls that lay so becomingly between the crown of coils and the forehead. Joel's alarum clock had next to be wound; then she happened to glance out again to where Miss Patty Dewey was rounding the corner of Ellen Street.

"Oh, you . . . you *wretch!*" cried the watcher, as the comely figure passed the railings and the tubs of laurel.

CHAPTER XII

A DEDICATION

JOEL did not return with a handsome tip in his pocket, but, to his intense surprise, Mr. Ransom Leadley himself met him at Liverpool Street, thanked him for having done so well at Norbys Priory, and handed him a cheque for fifty pounds, in addition to the stipulated pay, explaining that Mr. Nuton had wished this small acknowledgment made.

Joel had travelled first-class, because the second footman had been sent to the station in advance and been found waiting with the ticket. Perhaps it was the lingering effect of this unusual experience that made him feel disgusted by the short train run from the terminus to Chalk Farm; certainly he had never conceived so keen a detestation for the grimy outlook, the behaviour of youthful mechanics, the smell of Dalston Junction. Bad tobacco assaulted his nostrils; mirkiness, made up of lamplight and dusk of the city, tortured his eyes; as for throat and lungs, those felt stifled, because this air and atmosphere were not like unto those of Warren Woods or the rooms of Ursula's home. Three weeks ago the cheque in his pocket would have warmed his heart;

it couldn't now. When a young man, neither miser nor gambler, can be honestly rejoiced by money, he is free of many troubles. Riches are rare, but a little may mean much. Joel had reached that distance from the cradle at which the things that money cannot buy are all-important. We most of us admit that truth upon analysis, but we are inclined to think people very sane who live as if they do not know it. Mrs. Hunter, sincere though she was in her fixed principles, could be made glad or miserable by a few pounds gained or lost; indeed, she had once passed a wretched day through dropping a purse containing four-and-sixpence-halfpenny. Joel forgot the cheque in recalling an injury. Vincent had been cordial, in brotherly style, to the end; no patronage had affronted the Socialist, no obvious endeavour not to patronise probed the sensitiveness of the gentleman, yet, at parting, on the top step of the wide porch, before pushing the guest out to the motor, he had said:

“Come back to us any week-end you like, Hunter, we can always find room for you. But stop away, old man, if prudence bids you.”

The Nutons all liked him, Joel was sure; their geniality had not been put on. They had talked with him as a pleasure to themselves; the Squire had got to look for his presence in the library as a species

of treat in book-lovers' companionship; Vincent had relished discussing his dilettanti philosophies with a brain that could weigh, and, on occasion, flout them; Gwendolen had said she would miss him; nothing had marred the smoothness of the visit until those parting sentences had roughened the whole in retrospect. No, not the whole. Ursula remained a sublime memory.

"Stop away, old man, if prudence bids you." Quite kind, oh yes — capable of one construction that had no connection with Joel's being an iron-monger's clerk, of another that, even supposing his position was alluded to, was thoroughly reasonable. He wasn't angry that Vincent feared he might get a heart-break, or lest Vincent regarded him as dangerous to Ursula's peace — a mad notion — but simply because those casual, or careful, words, had brought down the whole beautiful castle of his own dreams.

This was his life, the train to Whitechapel, the train home, the rubbing shoulders with dirt, crime, disease, everything that was repellent, in spite of universal brotherhood sympathies and the theory that one man is as good as another except for self-culture. Consequently, the friendship with Ursula, which was to have been his armour against spiritual degeneration, was itself a peril. He might be crushed by the weight of the priceless suit of honour.

Vincent was right there. He must wear it at a distance from her if he wished to show the prudence at which Vincent had hinted. Which was no doubt why, scowling at Chalk Farm Station, Joel confided his luggage to an outside porter, and walked at a furious pace up Ellen Road, determining to go to Norbys soon for a week-end.

He was fairly up against circumstance, defying destiny. As thousands of young, ambitious men had done before him, he smiled grimly, and thought:

"I'll write the better for it."

But it was rough on him to have to enter a home that had never looked so unhomelike, while his deep feelings were in a maelstrom of commotion.

The rusty iron gate gave its familiar whine beneath his grasp, the door opened a quarter of a yard, let him in, closed up, and his mother's embrace was given with the usual decorum behind it, out of sight of the staring Jinks girls opposite. He made an effort to be gay, which was exactly how she was welcoming him.

"Hullo, you've grown a prettier little ma than ever."

"Silly boy. Do you like my lace collar? Clara wanted me to buy something of a poor woman from the hostel. How is the head, dear? Does it still ache?"

“ Good Lor’ no ! I don’t know I have one.”

It was the crucial moment. He had drawn her into the parlour, holding her by both shoulders, gazing into her eyes, apparently willing for his own to be read if she could manage it. But, alas for pre-arranged conduct, she hadn’t a syllable of all her diplomatically helpful speeches ready ; her mother’s influence would not work, because he had that satiric, semi-tender, self-secreting smile on, which sent little lines twisting up the corners of his mouth, and rendered him yet more a mystery. She had been so sure that directly she saw him in a full light she would detect if the Patty story was true (oblivious of all the full lights there had been before) ; now the gas was streaming down from the three burners, lit, for a few minutes, to make things bright for him, and whether those strong arms had been round Patty Dewey was not decided.

“ *You* have got handsomer, that’s sure, my darling,” she faltered, stroking his cheek. “ And that collar, yes, I do like it ; how clever of the dear, afflicted girl to guess it would smarten you up so. I want to send her a pot of my new marmalade. May I ? ”

Joel kissed the questioner most affectionately, but she heard him sigh.

“ No ; that might seem rather like trying to pay

her back; you shall write her one of your . . . er . . . your inimitable letters, to thank her for being so good to me. Look, best of mothers, Mr. Ransom met me with this. You should have it all if I thought you'd spend it on yourself."

Delight could be wrung from money after all. If it had been touching to hear Ursula say money didn't matter, it was so also to see the elderly woman's uplifted hands, the gesture as of one afraid to finger anything so precious.

"Oh, my Bear! . . . You can have a summer overcoat."

"There you go! We will motor about Richmond some Sundays. That's a form of extravagance that Clara tolerates finely, and tolerating anything does her a benefit interiorly. Where is she?"

The door banged open and shut with a bang as he spoke, and the sister bounced in and submitted quite gracefully — for her — to his salute.

"Well, bloated aristocrat? I'm glad you're here again. Oh, it's not a compliment; I expect I loathe to imagine a brother floundering like a gold fish in muddy water."

"Is that genuine natural history? I doubt it."

"What do you feel like?"

Their eyes were sparring, but he did not understand that he had become an object of greater in-

terest on account of Mrs. Judd's innuendos, nor did she realise that it was his "tameness" she had half despised.

"Like?" he queried. "Impressed, educated, resigned, and remarkably resolute, as a holiday rest should make a chap feel."

"You look a noodle in that masher collar, but never mind. I've got something to please you with here. Aren't I a model relative? A ninepenny volume of Brahms. I'll learn up your favourites that you hadn't the music of."

He thanked her effusively, with a pang of horror in his heart. Clara's fingers that were all thumbs, Clara's thumps, Clara's light and shade, desecrating his beloved Andante, while he must sham satisfaction. For from his earliest youth he seemed to have understood that he must do his utmost to encourage "poor Clara," who was severely handicapped by face and nature.

It was, or seemed to be, a jovial supper, though Dorothy, the sixteen-year-old orphan servant dropped the custard cups into the jug of lemonade. They chatted about all that happened in his absence, Mrs. Hunter having dozens of trivial anecdotes of the unknown neighbours, and the too-well-known trades-folk, to relate, things that she said had been waiting for him to share. Clara gave details of her daily

pupils, and odd leagues and associations; he answered questions galore as to the household routine, the furnishing, the servants, of Norbys; then, in obedience to his mother's eagerness, launched out into a garish description of bride and bridegroom prospective, the presents, and the big dance. Some instinct told her to spare inquiries about the "poor, dear, afflicted girl." After Clara had gone to bed, dog-tired with ticket-hawking, when the downstairs gas was put out, Joel invited mother, as of old, into his attic sanctum, put her into the arm-chair, so soon as they had agreed that it pleased him better to see her in it than to occupy it himself, sat on the narrow window ledge, making the laths of the blind quiver whenever he got excited, and poured out words as rapidly as even she could desire.

It was such rapture to be there, with his knees against hers, his eyes gazing unflinchingly into her face, that she wondered if she was not culpable, if tears and upbraidings would not have been more seemly from her than smiles and discreet nods? But he was so brown and muscular, her baby boy, and the voice was richer, the gestures somehow polished, the manner indescribably refined. How could she leave off being proud?

He started simply to give her the whole history of those weeks at Abbeyvalley. This was not inculpat-

ing in any way, since the revelation of all they had brought him had come on the step at leaving, or in the train coming back. Her loyalty to every little secret he had confided to her since childhood's dark ages allowed him to pour out the facts, under his breath, lest Clara, in the room below, should be kept awake. Mrs. Hunter had tears in her "forget-me-nots" as she heard of the Nutons' family ideals, of the conspiracy to spare the blind girl from witnessing the real sacrifice of Gwendolen. She was so used to plotting innocently to save Joel, Clara, Dorothy, even Mrs. Judd from "feeling hurt," when any trifles threatened their composure, that she said it was "quite natural" that the sweet child's burden wasn't to be made heavier by even a feather's weight.

As Joel went on with his tale he drew the friendship as though he had been writing a synopsis of a novel, and it "made a beautiful story," mother told him. When he finished, the alarum clock marked the unwonted time of 11.15.

She sprang up, almost frightened.

"Oh, how selfish I am! You haven't unpacked yet. Let me do it while you begin to undress. What sort of sleep will you get, and the office beginning again to-morrow?"

For her Mr. Leadley's wholesale ironmongery busi-

ness was as though it stopped during the chief clerk's holidays.

"Go along with you, I can haul out pyjamas in a minute, and the rest can wait till morn."

It was his habit to take her to the door and be kissed good-night on the mat, then watch for a final wave of her hand after she had crept off — a beaming disgrace, so late up — past the turn of the stairs. To-night, wanting to say something more, to solace her, he kept a tight arm round her shoulders, and lifting the hand-lamp so that his eyes were illumined for her, whispered:

"You understand? Being friends with such a girl *must* mean a great deal."

A sudden spasm of incredulous terror blanched the mother's cheeks.

"But she's blind, boy, a sort of cripple."

"No bar to friendship."

"Of course not. I am silly."

"I wanted you to feel comfortable about me in the future. You've worried in the past, you know. Promise you won't again?"

"Never."

Stealing away guiltily, fearful of making the loose board creak outside Clara's door, Patience Hunter was not able to experience the mingled ecstasy and

grief that his statement caused; but on her knees by the broken legged side table, where she had said her prayers night and morning ever since the moving from the north into Ellen Road, she sobbed for his sin, that she regarded now as confessed, and thanked God for his reformation that she thought she trusted in implicitly.

“But, dear Saviour, you *might* have let his mother do it,” she found herself complaining.

Joel had gone back to his seat on the painfully narrow window ledge, and when Patty Dewey walked by on her return from a theatre of varieties he did not know she was so near. His broad back was bent, his hands gripped his knees fiercely. He was fighting hard.

Not until he was cramped and cold did he move, slip from his shoes without a sound, peel off clothes, strip away sheets, and, regardless of propriety, roll his bared form up in the blanket, not risking the noise of opening a suit-case.

His last waking thought was of Ursula as he had seen her flinging herself on her knees to caress the daffodils, but before then he had accepted his cross, if not exactly as his mother would have counselled, still with manly pluck.

Some chaps, he knew, declared that the secret of

life is the necessity of pain and suffering. Others went further and called the crucifixion of desires the purest joy, the only lasting rapture. He couldn't go as far yet, but he felt that loving a girl he could not wed, since she was Ursula, was a glorious misery. And, as there could not be any danger for her, owing to his own general undesirability and roughness, he meant to cherish the blest misfortune.

CHAPTER XIII

JOEL'S ANTAGONIST

ARMANDINE DE VERT was puzzled. She had been back at Norbys three hours, counting the drive through the rain in the closed car, all the time with Ursula, and there was a stiffness between them. No, not that; the intimacy ran as smoothly, but without its habitual exuberance. Where was the jolly give and take teasings, the licence for saying horrid things, the absolute reliance on each other's common sense? Ursula's smile was very affectionate, but brighter than of old, less clinging, somehow conveying, without intention, that though she valued the love between them as much, she was thinking more of her share in giving than in taking. Madame de Vert was used to leading.

"Go down to your sanctum, and wait till I come, then we will have our talk out, now the feeding is mercifully over," came the brisk order.

The girl obeyed, saying:

"Don't be an age, dear, then."

But she was no sooner alone in the angle of the square fireplace where Joel and she had spent many

afternoons and evenings, than she wanted him just as badly, which was distinctly disappointing, as she had told herself again and again that Dina would fill a portion of the gap.

Madame went straight into Ursula's bedroom, on the excuse of borrowing a gilt safety pin for her blouse, if any one should meet her; not finding either of the special maids about she took to tip-toeing, that her invasion might escape notice from the waiter in the sanctum below, murmured "Bless the infant!" on descrying a posy of spring forget-me-nots before her own portrait, but, almost simultaneously found what she had come to seek, and shook her fist at it.

Joel Hunter photographed well, as men of forcibly moulded faces mostly do. The head had a bold poise, the lines round the eyes and mouth exhibited those character-indications that often kept his mother from treating him as a child, and a powerful effect is needed to produce that result with some mothers. Armandine stood in contemplation such a while that she ought to have formed a deep judgment, which was summed up in the reflection:

"You're a born fighter, are you? . . . Not used to giving in? . . . Ah, but we'll see. . . . *I've* come back."

Then she stole out of the room, her teeth clenched

behind the big mouth that snapped out sharpest sentences constantly, but kissed as though caresses were solemn vows. Next she stood in front of her own looking-glass for a minute, frowning, but reflecting, as was her wont, "Thank heredity I'm ugly." Her meaning was that if she had been pretty she believed her husband would not have chosen her; that her qualities would have been prettier, less strong, to match that doggedness of will which harsh expressions told would have been left out of the blend; that she would have been petted, perhaps, but not obtained her aims as she had always done. For John's dying had ended a record of well-nigh perfect possession. She had determined to make herself necessary to the rich philanthropist some beautiful girls were anxious to capture, and by sheer audacity had won her man. Having got him she had paid him royally, by that worship of him which he would not have received from a wife accustomed to adore herself. On his death-bed he had told her that he could not remember ever having seen anything fairer than her face; and he had meant it.

The looking-glass gave a replica of a very crude appearance, as far as features went, of a skin colour not unlike a dried walnut-shell, of a mouth so blunt-cornered and thick that the chin was dwarfed out of all proportion, though the jaws, at the side, came

down in knobs seldom seen in feminine countenances. Madame's eyes did not atone; they were pale gray-blue — the infatuated person's eyes — glimmering behind spectacles. Yet the message of her outer personality, told by the plump, big hands, the broad-hipped figure, the width of shoulder, and the domineering step also, was a call to the weak to come and be managed for, taught and cherished. Madame had wanted a nurseryful of babies, but Stephen alone arrived to monopolise the wealth of love.

She had gripped hold of Ursula Nuton, made her into a kind of daughter. Holding that it is a mistake to fritter away affection on too many particular objects, to these two she turned for response, not the devotion that most women desire from son or friend, but their dedication to her views for them. By sheer passion of purpose she had poured philanthropic zeal into her boy, till his natural selfishness had to either give way to the motive, or learn how to make it serve him. He had just succeeded admirably in the latter expedient. Ambitions all centred, for him, in being a "noble man" before the public eye. By her intense demand for co-operation she had made Ursula nearly as eager for Stephen's nobility.

Directly she had heard of Joel Hunter's being received as a friend, especially by the blind girl, she had scented danger to her command, and nothing but

the charm of a holiday spent in nursing her boy out of a bad cold, and pouring more philanthropy into his soul, had kept her from rushing back to Norbys to oust the interloper. It was one of her selected objects in life to guard Ursula from marriage. Ugliness in a wife was an advantage, blindness made a wife impossible. And since blindness was handsomely gilded in this instance Madame was desperately anxious — if a person can be said to be anxious whose trust in her own capability has never been shaken.

Trotting into the sanctum she sat down at the fireplace angle beside the girl, and said:

“Now tell me everything about the Hunter creature.”

The request was not in earnest; she knew this was the way to silence praises that might have been uttered, leaving her free to formulate her own ideas about him.

“I wrote you a great deal.”

“Radical?”

“Yes, I said so.”

“Spiritual?”

“Sincerely.”

“Creedy?”

“Not at all. You would approve his freedom; it is larger than mine, though he hasn't had a Dim-

at his side to suggest doubts about all points of usual faith, and to mass them into a beautiful mystery one reverences more for its dimness, yet feels is incorrect, just man-made."

"*That* wasn't my influence — not the groove it should have drilled for you to run in, child."

"No, but so 'tis, dear."

Armandine swallowed this check, registering a need for future exertion — all as she believed for her charge's ultimate comfort — and returned to the Hunter catechism.

"Moral?"

She expected hesitation, but the answer came with a radiant smile.

"Yes, quite."

"How do you draw your deduction, and from what data?"

"We have talked about . . . about nearly everything."

"*You?* Haven't I seen you curling up like a frightened snail, when the ordinary social improvement subjects have been mentioned?"

"I never curl up when you discuss, Dina — nor with Joel."

Worse and worse.

"What's the end of this tie to be, in your opinion?"

"I hope it won't have one; there is eternity for it after this earth."

"You and he are just going on debating shocking topics, as you think them, without getting any nearer to each other than . . . platonics? Oh, don't be so stupid."

"You aren't forgetting that I am, as you put it, out of the running?"

"A moral, spiritual Radical will soon tire of aloofness. Look here, Ursa, can't you begin — only begin — to perceive that you've been making a fool of yourself?"

"Yes, Dina."

Ursula was leaning back against the bronze velvet curtain that could be drawn to shut the square fireplace away, her hands were loosely clasped in her lap, she wore the detached, yet expectant, look of the patient blind. Madame's lips trembled as she surveyed the picture.

"What sort of foolishness is it?"

"That I want him so dreadfully, want him always close by, want his love that I can't ever have, and his friendship too. So I am learning, a little bit each day, to want the immaterial delight more, and the other less. He is the one man I would have given myself to if he had asked for me before I lost my eyes. As he didn't come soon enough for that, I love

him with the woman's heart instead of the young girl's, and that is the safeguard, dear; my dignity has grown, my pride won't flinch. I'm not ashamed. Why should I be? If God had sent him in time the more I doted on him — in reason — the greater would have been my virtue; wives don't dote properly, as a rule. By having to bury all my ordinary woman's hopes again I shall succeed in getting them deeper down — the spooks won't rise so much. Dear old Dina, you can't be shocked, firstly because you don't know how, and secondly because you *had* . . . the best."

"You'd better think you've had it, and lost it, bairn."

"Yes. And treasure the softness left."

"No; I don't know that I mean what I advised. Because the young man is just an upstart."

"He *is* very aggressive, in a sense," said Ursula, with a quiet little smile.

She obstinately refused to lose her temper in his defence, and it was generally after a mutual flare-up that these two high-spirited women became consoling fuel for each other's intellect.

"You perverse being! You understand absolutely what I wish to convey?"

"That Joel is a fortune seeker; that he flatters the blind girl in order to advance himself by her means,

socially and financially. But it's new for you to be chary of saying things for yourself."

One must rely on some measure of receptiveness before one holds forth on a subject vital to the listener. Even Madame was conscious of that.

"Blind love can't admit the possibility of 'black' being 'black'?"

"It's my blind sight that knows so much more of a few truths than common sight contrives. There's a sort of instinct that comes to the crippled, Dina, darling."

"Would nothing shake your subjection to the aggressive stranger?"

Ursula hesitated; the problem was peculiar.

"Finding him out in little deceptions might — yes, of course it would. I trust him now. So I am quite happy, except for wanting more of him than I can ever have. You needn't be scared for me. I am going to love his wife, when he finds her, and pet his babies. Won't my life be dearer, warmer, when I have mastered my lesson?"

"There'll be the interim," said Madame, with a grating laugh. "How will you feel when your aspiring Radical vows that he can't live without you?"

The head against the curtain was slowly shaken.

"He will not, Dina. Joel isn't a man who would

stoop to tell a girl she was indispensable. As a lover he would need a lot of encouragement; his estimate of himself is humble. 'I'm such a rough chap,' mostly expresses it. His rugged sincerity is like — like — Oh, I know, the crags of the Peak, with sun on its edge, but a thunderstorm darkening the sky beyond. We saw it so one day; he was eyes for me."

Madame was working herself into a fury. Her hands were pounding one another on the knee of her black gown.

"That's the preface, but he has planned the last chapter. Ah, you miserable innocent! You'll be mad sorry you've let him come on so. Wait till he threatens to blow his brains out."

It was Ursula's laugh that sounded now, and its tone was of unfeigned amusement.

"Joel? . . . His passions have to obey him. He is the kind of man who might refuse to lift an absolutely hopeless siege, but never be beaten into blowing up his own arsenals."

"I hate the very name of him," cried Madame. "He's cajoling you, with an up-the-sleeve calculation what he will do for himself with your fortune. And you can't try the expedient of consenting to marry him, if he'd take you as a pauper, because you'd be such a cruel burden on an ironmonger."

"I wouldn't dishonour him by any test; I believe in him."

"We both know how weddings are mostly concocted — out of passion, greed or money, avarice, and . . ."

"There's no disgrace in the first," put in Ursula. "It's the way God pulls the string of His live puppets. They boast about *their* great feelings, that He teaches, and then, I guess, He smiles and says, 'It is good,' as He did at Creation."

"Rubbish."

"You will have to like my friend for eternity when you meet him, Dina."

"If you ever find him out in lies or sneakishness, promise you won't hold to him still, through sheer cussedness."

"How could I? The Joel I loved would be dead. He might repent, but cracked or rivetted loyalty wouldn't hold my faith."

Madame gave a species of snort. There was a dim chance, then?

"It's for your sake I speak," she burst forth. "I won't have you with your blindness, the prey of a schemer, giving your all to him, appreciated only for the mineral portion of it, clothing, housing, feeding, warming, polishing, encouraging him, establishing him in his ambitions, heart and soul absorbed in

his career, bearing his children, while he endures you, laments his misfortune at his club, or goes to other women — women with eyes — for consolation. I've helped you over bad years, rebelled with you, suffered out of human fellowship. Do you suppose I can sit by and let you drop — a poor, amorous fool — into the arms of a . . . Hunter?"

The girl's face was white in the shadowed corner, though the fire glow frolicked on her white skirt.

"Dear old Dina, of course you couldn't, and nobody asks you to. Joel doesn't want to marry me. . . . How could he? A man doesn't look on a blind woman in that way; she's sister to him; and he is a fine character, not mercenary. . . . Now let us play at imagining. . . . Suppose Stephen, who is not rich enough for *his* ambitions, were my own age and wanted to be a very close and confidential friend with me, would you say it was a sham, dear?"

"No, of course not! Stephen is different."

"That is what I wanted. Well, Joel is somebody's Stephen. All the noble clay wasn't used up when Steve was compounded. In any case, Joel was made first. Be nice about him, or I'll regret having bared my feelings."

Madame poked the fire thunderously.

"Subject of the young bounder banished for to-day, then. I'll give you a *résumé* of Stephen's

speech on the Workers' Colony he is helping to invent. They have made him treasurer, young though he is; crowds of splendid young college men are in the scheme; older men, such as Lord Drury, think well of it. The settlement will be started in a village called Vollett, six or seven miles out of Cambridge. The Undergrad's New Toy, some one has christened it. But fervour, the right spirit, has framed the rules. Such a speech it was, Ursa, delivered the night before he got ill, in an Institute Hall that was crammed with an odd jumble of artisans and intellectualists, who united in hanging on my lad's every syllable."

"Aspiring young Radicals, of course," answered Ursula.

CHAPTER XIV

PATTY, SEEN BY NEW EYES

BREAKFAST was Clara's tête-à-tête time with her brother, as Mrs. Hunter was forbidden by them both to get up till after the meal. Newspapers generally kept the two supplied with topics of conversation, until the girl, guessing that Joel found reading "business" items difficult, curbed her tongue, and only emitted snorts when public intelligence riled her specially. On the first morning after his return he found that he surpassed national affairs in interest for her. She scanned him keenly.

"I'd ask what you're brooding over if I'd any hope of hearing unvarnished fact from a man."

"You are not usually called the straightforward sex, my dear," he suggested, cutting a thick slice of the tin loaf.

"In our family the son's the liar."

"What proof?"

"Oh, don't you remember how you got whacked once or twice, as a boy, for lies? I never was."

"A child can't be whacked into truthfulness; at the best only into avoidance of the peril of false-

hood. I left off my depravity in that respect when of an age to choose sincerity for its own sake."

"Ah, did you? I'd bet my bottom dollar that the natural tendency to sham is as strong as ever; maybe kept in practice."

This was not a quarrel, merely an example of the way brother and sister pleasantly disagreed daily, but the accusation hit Joel hard. A man does not require to examine his conscience with the thoroughness of an anchorite before becoming aware of his besetting temptations; a man who knows, as Joel did, that a streak of duplicity is actually in him usually writhes under the sting of shame; often he is made scrupulously truthful by it. In a home life such as his there was no room for private growth, unless by manœuvring; little excuses had earned him, time after time, a precious hour of leisured peace, the fiction he was supposed to be writing had locked his door better than any key, while he had smoked in idleness; sometimes moods that mother would never have been able to understand, or cease fretting over, had he revealed them, had sent his tramping after office closed, instead of returning with dark brow to the parlour and its various stuffinesses; then he had talked vaguely of having had extra business to deal with. No lie this, he had told himself; a human being's temper out-breaks *are* his business, must be settled. Then

young Rivers had sometimes done duty for Patty. Also the famous cycling expedition to Epping had been called a solitary one. Finally, at Norbys he had joined in the conspiracy against Ursula, for her sparing. Yes, Clara's attack was hatefully correct.

If he had been a truthful man he would have let his mother see that the narrowness of home was frequently odious; her chit-chat, often the kind he abhorred though he loved the chatterer, would perhaps have told her outright that her curiosity about old Bennet's mean doling out of supplies, and the indebtedness of the Jinks' seniors, was low; and he surely would have bade Clara leave music to the musical. As for his outside doings, he must — truthfully — have called the Victory Inn the theatre of all his real ardent sympathies during two years or so, except for the tenderness that bound him to the best little mother in the world. Looking backwards he saw he had been false, but the opposite line of action would have smashed up domestic kindliness. Home is so often a house built with fictions.

No doubt a finer man might have shunned the Victory Inn directly it had become a rival to fireside honour. Well, if he had, the fretting after it must have been hidden. It had never been anything better in his eyes than a squalid makeshift; Patty herself had stood for sex only, chastened by admiration for

the pluck of the lone woman running the business and taking care of herself. None the less the two — the woman and her hotel — had stood also for the utmost liberty and excitement he had allowed himself. The development of the ego demands some kind of space. There was none in 10, Ellen Road, not for a man, at all events. Clara was, he knew, most honourable, and she was often the curse of the limited circle.

While biting through the thick bread, sparingly spread with marmalade, Joel scrutinised his sister, denounced himself silently, but realised the wisdom of Vincent Nuton's quiet remark, "All men are liars."

"Can't you believe a word I speak, Clara?" he asked, at last, amicably.

"Dear me, certainly! I've got my eyes, you know; I can *see* when you're hoodwinking us."

An exaggeration, couched unconsciously in terms that cut.

"All right, old girl, if it's any consolation to you to be so mighty clever and superior, be them. Mother must have told you of the fifty pounds, since I heard you talking in her room; I'll take you both somewhere to-night. Decide if it's to be a theatre or picture show."

"Aren't you eager to . . . go to your club?"

"Not at all. To-morrow night will do for that.

After my secretaryship expires in April I shall cut the job, though they want to make me take it on again."

"Why? Fallen out with anybody?"

The bold, black eyes of which she had boasted met his glance with a triumphant sort of insolence that she would have defined as a sister's right. Joel bore it steadily, from which she concluded that he was a firmer liar than she had thought him. And firmness of any sort won her to comradeship. All the more because in her secret soul she knew she hadn't the courage of her convictions on any subject threatening danger or public unpleasantness.

"I mean to write seriously," he answered, rising, and pushing his chair into the corner it was supposed to occupy, between the treadle sewing machine and the Japanese bookcase.

Mother hugged him closely when they said "good-bye till evening," the frills of her flannelette nightgown tickling his neck as usual, her face looking faded and old without the coils of hair above it. She had not forgotten his "confession," nor the reformation that had set in; she was too shy of the subject to seem to remember. So her first topic was an unfortunate one, the detailed story of how one of the Jinks girls opposite had just called out, "Get along, you nasty swank," to her younger brother — and

wasn't it the vulgar language you might expect from the child of a mother who hadn't more self-respect than to be seen emptying saucepan water into the roadside gutter? A sickening sense of meanness, family and personal, dwelt with Joel Hunter as he walked to the station, knowing himself the object of the three Miss Carters' peepings through the lace-insertion of some dirty blinds, and guessing that mother was out of bed, to watch if he turned his head towards the window of a certain pretty, painted woman who lived alone in the last house, at the corner where city men passed in troops several times daily — a tenant no respectable landlord should have tolerated, only, of course, old Bennet . . . etc., etc.

The train was crowded, Joel surrendered his seat to a forlorn girl-child who was trying to be grown-up; her look of worldly knowledge struck him as hideous, for he was recalling Ursula's way of carrying the wisdom that woman should have; Ursula's perfect purity of speech when discussing topics that would have startled Ellen Road denizens over the family board, but occupied their thoughts, mostly ignobly, in secret. The shams of life seemed to drag Joel down too, so convinced was he that he was part of the universal disorder. Yet, with Ursula a man felt nothing but clean and true, while able to play a part with her. Wasn't there stability of virtue any-

where? Were human beings bound to be either brutal or insincere? The problem was too much for him.

Having relished old Mr. Leadley's praisings, his underlings' envy, the junior partner's friendly jests and attempts to draw him out on the subject of high life at Norbys, after burying his identity among ledgers of trade accounts, Joel woke up, at lunch, to the fact that he could not put off seeing Patty after to-morrow. He wished he had not shirked the ordeal for to-night. Then he would have known the worst was over, or, at any rate, be fighting the affair somehow. Inaction invariably cost him dear.

Going home, shut up in a carriage with eight men who smoked vile stuff and spat on the floor, he tried to focus his memory on the sanctum fireside or the daffodil woods, but couldn't. That marked the first check to his resolution to go to the Priory very soon for a week-end, and he seemed to know that the sordid life would so clasp him that he would not escape its soiling tentacles in a hurry. So it was a most depressed, outwardly hilarious, man who explained a third-rate play to a mother who could not quite hear from the "dress-circle," as she called the lower gallery. Getting her home was always rather a matter for diplomacy; she was so afraid to cross the streets, and yet sure that he could not have done

it safely without her guidance. Clara managed to get lost, which was a subject of such agitation to "ma," that the daughter might have been a pretty young lady of a former century, not a brusque, ugly woman of twenty-seven — to the world — but Joel's elder really by three years. This queer determination of Clara's to be his junior had led to hundreds of tearful scenes ere this evening. On her safe return from the dangers of the streets she asked, with a burst of laughter: "Isn't a woman in the twenties to be trusted to look after herself better than any idiotic man?"

Mrs. Hunter exclaimed: "Oh, *don't* be so foolish, child; you will be saying 'in her teens' next," and that brought all the subject to the fore again.

Joel could not resist asking:

"Where's the feminine veracity, eh, Clar?"

"Some veiling is necessary to hard certainties," she replied, without a second's hesitation. "Lord, I never asked *you* to speak openly of yourself; I like decency as much as any one. But you can take example by me; if I choose to call myself twenty-seven that's only because I know there's no humbug in it. When you strut about as ——"

"Be quiet, mother's tired," shouted the brother, then knew how low shouting was. No, it wasn't easy to preserve, or build, a noble character in Ellen Road.

"Dearest, I'm so grieved I got flustered coming home," little Mrs. Hunter whispered into his ear when he kissed her good-night. "Perhaps I'm growing beyond these jaunts. You'd better go alone with Clara for the future — though I do love being at a play, with my big baby to make the plot real."

"Bless you, taking you is more satisfaction than the show."

"Bear, I don't want the dust-cloak. . . . I've been thinking. Let us buy a typewriting machine instead, and when I have learnt to use it, couldn't I do your novel?"

"Hanged if you shall!" cried the young man. "It shall be a frock as well as the coat — for any idiot can do my stuff; and we ought to give employment. Some poor devil may be at his, or her, wit's end for money."

Next day at the office was unredeemed drudgery in which he could not banish his particular sword of Damocles, that overhanging obligation of a scene with Patty. For it would be tragic, whether she took it coolly or reproached him.

An early supper, which Mrs. Hunter said they might call late dinner if they wanted to be fashionable, preceded his special club night of the week, when he went as an official, so he had to eat steak and tomatoes and submit to two helpings of custard pud-

ding, with Clara shedding sarcasms as fast as a chicken moults its feathers, and mother trying obviously to be unsuspecting and interested in the smoking concert, "so much nicer than billiards," that he told her was to take place, and be followed by a collection for a chap out of work through illness.

"Charming, benevolent creatures, you men! How much will you spend on drink and smoke while making twopence-halfpenny?" asked the sister.

"Don't be late, dearest — and think of me all the time," whispered Mrs. Hunter as she helped him on with his coat.

Joel became obstinate.

"I'm sure to get kept. Don't sit up for me," he answered, as on dozens of other occasions.

Then, as he shut the whining gate, maternal solicitude extinguished her dread of neighbours' ears, and she called out loudly:

"Have you got a clean pocket-handkerchief?"

"Yes, of course."

So he could not even go to his club without being made a fool of in advance? Petty trials were not to be weighed against the worth of her love, he knew that; blamed himself for the loathing of the little house he felt as he strode from it. But they have their deadening influence; they stamp daily life with a character.

Something of the old sensation came to him as he pushed open the baize door of the clubroom, smelt the beer and whisky, sawdust, wet mackintoshes, dry rot, and compound of breaths. This was vulgar and derogatory, yet it was a man's environment; male minds were ready to rub against his, male minds that took various views of politics, the trend of the age, the legitimate joys to be wrung from living, the demands of the strange things recognized as duty. Not a chap there but had his good qualities; though some were vicious in nine ways, in some tenth those same individuals would shine. Joel knew many as well as he knew his own soul — aye, more accurately — had never shrunk from their seamy sides, or expected too much from their natures. As for truth-telling, why, habitually they probably all lied — only a pal could rely on getting a right version of anything if he pressed seriously. It was a free atmosphere. Nobody objected to a flaw or two in a companion. Joel's weakness for Patty had endeared him to all those who did not happen to be jealous. They had a hearty welcome for him to-night. Soon he was smoking and drinking with the rest, not that he had any genuine liking for beer, but because it suited him, and spirits didn't, and a man must drink something. The barmaid had been in and out several times before Miss Dewey appeared, through the side door opening

on to the cobble-stone passage that ran between her garden entrance and the room. Joel forced himself to look at her with a broad smile, and his exclamation was fitting to the occasion:

“We couldn’t begin the entertainment without you, Miss Patty. . . . How are you? . . . Come and give us courage.”

It was correct for her to occupy the seat close by his presidential chair, and her red velveteen clad shoulders touched his arm as she sat down, her miraculously dressed black hair, scented with Ess Bouquet, was within a few inches of his Ursula-chosen collar.

She was undeniably handsome, more than that, alluring — a novelettish word that flashed into his brain; the long-shaped dusky eyes searched his expression a second before drooping behind a cloud of lashes, as was their wont when situations were embarrassing. Not that she was ever at a loss how to behave — that was not Patty Dewey’s style at all — but she had used the trick of looking down all her years of discretion; it had helped her out of countless tight places, and would, until the end of blooming womanhood. Plump, gracious, with a kindness that glowed from her, she easily made a man think she was not prudish; but when he overstepped the bounds of the generous licence of word and look she permitted

him, there came a humiliating check, in which her lashes played no inconsiderable part.

"Why, Joel, you're a toff," she said lightly. "I read about you and your burglar fight; now I see you've come back with a martial air, eh, boy?"

Laughter and talk flowed on; the tenor of the party broke down and Patty gently condoled with him, pushed him on to the improvised platform once more, played his accompaniment on the strident piano, banging out chords when he shook, keeping him up to the rapid waltz-time. Joel brought a banjo from her drawing-room, sang nigger melodies to it, feeling imbecile, but loudly applauded. The hands of the clock slipped round, noise increased, the reek of the room also, arguments waxed hot, Patty had to part would-be combatants at last, and forbade some men to drink more. Her word was law.

When those clock hands pointed to five minutes to eleven the exodus commenced, at a sign of the landlady's fat white fingers. She stopped telling Joel about a local scandal that she might caution the departing revellers,

"Now, lads, quietly please, for the honour of the house."

"Right-oh, missis!" sang out the wildest of the crowd, and the street rang only with the tramp of

feet, not one uproarious burst of merriment, not a single chorus.

Patty carried her excellent cuteness into affairs of private concern as well as into business. She did not need telling that Joel was changed, that he would be awkward with her to-night if they were alone, that she mustn't rouse opposition, but let custom bring back the cordiality of attitude that had preceded the sudden kisses at parting. She meant to have him, safely her own, till death did them part; she rather hungered to throw her nice soft arms round his neck and tell him he had improved, but there are hours in which it is disastrous to seem dependent. By dismissing him early this time she would tighten her actual hold of him.

As the last of the "boys" vanished she laid a hand on Joel's arm, and pointed to the way of exit.

"I'm going to shut up at once; I've had a long day, dear. Glad to see you here again. Had a slice of luck, haven't you?"

The fifty-pound cheque was delightfully simple to mention. Patty nodded.

"Trust you to keep your head. That's what first drew me to you; he's a level chap, the sort one could rely on in a crisis, I said to myself, not like the ruck."

It is always pleasing to be singled out for being

the hero for great, vague occasions. Patty hadn't the slightest notion what she meant, nor did he credit her with more than a wish to be kind, but the element of mutual approbation was between them. His anxiety now was lest she might repeat the kiss, but he need not have feared.

Crossing the floor, among the mud-marks, spent matches, torn programmes that littered the green linoleum, she looked out into the night, from the doorway, an instant, then drew back to let him pass out.

Her eyes were soft with affection, but it was not till he had reached the step, was looking round to raise his cap, that she asked her one crucial question.

"Am I awful second-rate after the swell mob, Joel?"

"Don't, dear," he answered. "I've most sincere regard for you."

CHAPTER XV

A CLOUD OVER FRIENDSHIP

"You have been doing something to the child. She is grown up."

In these words Madame de Vert put her grievance before the Nutons, in Ursula's absence, one day. Standing in the library among them, arms crossed on her breast in a Napoleonic attitude she often struck, with her ungainly, short figure and plain face, her matter-of-fact manner, her impulsiveness, she resembled the wild little swirl that comes in the expanse of a slow, wide river when a reed has stopped the current and dead leaves have drifted and remained as an obstruction.

"It is the common lot of women, dear Madame, the ascending towards the mount of victory," said the Squire.

"It's all right," put in languid Gwendolen, between whom and Dina there was an unrecognised, perpetual feud. "Ursie's inclined to be a bit of a sentimentalist, but that doesn't hurt; it's a lucky thing she can have her toys to play with, like other women. I was in love myself half-a-dozen times;

when at seventeen, I was as juvenile as she is at twenty-seven."

Vincent, with a psychologist's appreciation of Madame's irritation, blew gently on its flames.

"We are all a degree ousted; yours is not the sole injury. We do not, unitedly, occupy the blank space left by that capital chap, Hunter."

Armandine slapped the back of an oak chair and then cast a withering glare at Gwen.

"Well, that is your faulty management of her. To let the man come so near! To expose her to . . ."

Miss Nuton cut in, as she frequently did when Ursula's companion was beginning to harangue.

"She couldn't get *too* sentimental about him; and, as I have just tried to explain, the ups and downs of see-saw attachments aren't to be despised as excitements. Why should Ursie do without experiences? She says she means to watch over his career, and I shouldn't wonder if she didn't want to adopt one of his bairns some day. Don't rile her about him, then it'll be a pleasure for her, not a 'cuss.' You're so fearfully energetic."

Without condescending to remonstrate further, Madame walked out of the room. Gwendolen made a proposition.

"Get Billie back, Vin; he's in London, broke."

The advice left a silence; it was so unexpected. At

length the brother began to slightly demur, though he was by no means enemy to the idea. The Billie of whom they spoke had been Ursula's lover before her accident; he had rushed abroad after hearing of the awful disfigurement it had left. They had not been engaged, but everybody had believed they would be.

"Are we to act on the supposition that our sister's blindness will have become endurable to Billie, for a sufficient consideration, now that he has ruined himself?"

Gwen shrugged her shoulders.

"He saw her too soon. The shade isn't revolting, but even you were horrified that morning when you first saw her convalescent. Billie was in the house, remember; he sneaked to the threshold of her room after you had left her, intending to finish some interrupted sentimentality of the accident night."

"How do you know all this?"

"His mother told me yesterday. Though he funk'd proposing, couldn't bear the change in Ursie, he hasn't dropped loving the old one. He has sweated in the mines he persuaded his parents to finance; they're smashed by the fiasco, but he's not been the common type of prodigal. Get him down. Say you want to see if something can't be saved out of the wreck, that we mayn't lose our tenants."

"How much did Ursie care?"

"She was only about seventeen, I tell you, in spite of more years. She wasn't a quarter awake then. Since the pluck in her had to rise to meet the double crisis of bein' blinded and jilted, she's ready for any experiment. The kid is tremenjous mettled."

"The normal life of woman *might* compensate for the flabbiness Billie exhibited. And the Heviot connection is fit, if there's not a penny left."

"I'll manage Billie; he's my sort. I'll make him cry in ten minutes, then he'll be in best form for winning Ursie's forgiveness. It would be famous to see her married in spite of the black eclipse, poor darling."

The object of their solicitude was walking in some valley woods talking philanthropy. From rising to sleeping her mind was full of such subjects now as free continuation schools, improved dwellings for artisans, and agricultural openings for the cure of wastrels. She was thankful that her memory was singularly retentive, since Dina expected her to recollect the details of schemes as though she had seen them in print, instead of having heard them once read out. So keen was her desire to be useful that she was often able to remind Dina of exact statistics. This working of giant powers for the amelioration of other folk's wrongs was Madame's tonic for her, she

knew; she felt its beneficial bracing. Her money was lavishly spent, and her clear young intellect toiled, in the same causes for which John de Vert had laboured; he was never called Jean after his marriage with Dina. It was especially Stephen's pet charity, the Cambridgeshire settlement, that occupied the women. There were builders' plans to supervise, costs to be cut down, rules to be outlined; then Steve submitted all the projects and criticisms as his own, to the committee of which he was treasurer. Ursula wondered if he was growing steadier? She had not been applied to again for relief. That he was an enthusiast, as well as a spendthrift and pleasure-seeker, she was fully aware; the combination was as much a feature of his vivid personality as sun and tempest are of summer.

This morning, treading carefully on the mossy paths of the woods, she was longing for Joel to interpret the scene to her, while Madame's exultant voice went on describing Stephen's gifts and future.

"His commonsense, too!" was a phrase that fixed her attention presently. "To have immersed Lord Drury, that brilliant and rich Good Samaritan, in his brotherhood!"

"It is rather wonderful. For Steve is only a boy, after all."

"They are the greatest friends. You should see how the elder leans on my boy's affection. For Steve is affectionate; that's just the word for it. Here is a broken man of forty, and my lad of twenty sympathises with the passion that has socially extinguished the statesman as well as with the altruism that *must* spend itself on England. Lord Drury's name is not to appear at all, but, practically, he is financing the affair for the start; the collected capital is to be invested for income. I met the woman driving yesterday. She is at Greyshot, five miles off, isn't it?"

"Yes; and we shall not be able to see anything of Lord Drury when he is there too."

"Of course 'we,' meaning the Nutons, can't! I would, if I weren't your companion. I'd call on her. The country might come to its death-throes if the Nutons were friendly to a divorced peer who hasn't made the woman his wife! By the bye, Steve says that is her fault; she doesn't hold with bonds. Lord Drury actually got him to argue with her, plead for the respectabilising of the union — all in vain."

Ursula was keeping her friend still, and sniffing luxuriously at the scent of primroses. All the trees were whispering love idylls to the accompaniment of the thrushes on high boughs, and the larks that had

risen higher still, from the ploughed field beyond the hedge. Yes, she knew it was ploughed, she could smell turned earth.

"She's a lovely creature," went on Madame volubly. "Isn't that excuse enough? She can turn a man's head by looking at him, not have to work to gain love. But who knows if even Lord Drury will stick to her when mere beauty's over? Ten to one he will turn respectable in old age, take a churchy wife when his own dies, and be received back by the Pharisee. What would you do, child, in her place?"

"I? Go away secretly."

"Break his heart? After he has given up office, fame, position, all the usual sweets, for you?"

"The woman he swore to cherish till death is still living. What becomes of truth? And what use is rapture, if it's that between them, if the life is just one lie?"

"You cruel little Puritan."

"Not really, Dina. But I'd choose truth myself rather than passion. For if fidelity isn't there for others, it isn't there either for the one. . . . Don't let us bother about poor Lord Drury's entanglement now, though. Are the primroses glorious? Do tell me."

Armandine glanced round to see.

"Not fully out. And, ugh, what a smell, it's

fungus somewhere. Let's get into the healthy open."

Ursula sighed. Going a few steps alone she knelt to feel the crinkled leaves among the grass, found buds, and then a perfect bloom.

"Oh, Dina, *why* aren't you a nature-lover? It would so suit you."

"I can't rhapsodise about weeds; there are millions of men, women, and children with faces turned up to unkind skies. I save my love for them."

"The one love helps the other."

"I suppose the amateur detective yarned of vegetation by the hour for you."

"He certainly saw for me, his words were chosen so that I could carry away whole pictures."

"Girls are proverbially fickle; I thank my stars I've a son growing up. That's next best thing to being a man."

The clouds between the friends had passed by evening, and Madame then was full of her old charm for Ursula, talking in the sanctum chimney corner of John and the legacy of his unselfish ambitions. Because the voice broke now and then, and tears fell, the younger woman reproached herself quite needlessly for having failed to give the right welcome home, of having shown a longing for one who was still a stranger to Dina.

"I would not save a penny of our income if it weren't necessary to be fed and clothed while fighting the battle for the poor," cried Madame, hoarsely, clasping Ursula by the arm. "I'd go out and beg, like the old Franciscans, only great changes aren't wrought by such means any longer, and Steve must have no harassing poverty to take up his thoughts. My own happiness is gone, I have forgiven that; all I want now is success for Stephen, the glory of his stripping himself of all, of shortening his life even with toil, of setting an example to his century. Death, indeed? I have lost John's bodily presence, but John lives on still in our son. Death? I pray the Mystery, God, that Steve may die in torment rather than live like the average young man. You talked of broken hearts this morning, or I did; well, chick, mine would break if Stephen degenerated. You can't follow all I feel, for you aren't a mother with a passion for her boy's holiness."

"No, dear, I shall never know."

"Be another kind of giver; you *are*, but I want your enthusiasm even more than your money help. The means would come somehow; fervour breeds fervour. You can share in all our works. There's no loneliness possible for a girl with her hands put to such a plough."

Ursula's head was drooped, her human self felt

very painfully alone. She loved those plough-handles, oh, yes, but Dina seemed to have overlooked the fact that some one might have helped hold them, some strong guide. So she did not answer, and Madame went on speaking.

“It is an age since Steve wrote to you, isn’t it?”

How be true, and yet kind? Was this insignificant question come to reveal the lad’s appeal for money, to set his mother inquiring why he was in debt, to begin to break her heart?

“What did he say about the housing speech in that last letter, the one I read to you in the lane? Didn’t he own it was the best he has made as yet?”

The position was saved.

“He called it his first real bit of oratory. Dina, let us go to Cambridge soon together, just for a week-end. I long to talk to Steve all by myself; he will say so much that he would blush to speak before you. He thinks you blame his delight in his cleverness. And we will make him deliver an address, all for us. The more he practises the faster eloquence will grow.”

CHAPTER XVI

HOME LIFE

JOEL's letters were read out by the maid Harriet, not by Madame. The old servant did not dislike him. But they were as stiff as he had said, and Ursula did not wonder. For when she thought out how she would have wished them written, spontaneously, tracing the outlines of his daily circumstances for her to colour in the blank spaces through her knowledge of his nature, she felt that he really could not do it for more than one reader. If he had possessed great circumstances, she would not have liked him to boast of them; since he owned only poor circumstances she, inconsistently, preferred that he should not bare them. He wrote most of politics and literature. Can any subjects be more unsatisfying between friends who have not had time to exhaust more than a fraction of the personal topics that alone explain persons to each other? Harriet read with utmost precision and no expression; she would have regarded expressiveness as taking a liberty, as bad a breach of decorum as if Palley, the butler, had effusively greeted a visitor in the hall, or a footman had laughed while wait-

ing at table. The effect of Joel's well-meant efforts was to bring fully to Ursula's mind and heart the conviction of her uselessness. True, she could write cheques, remember figures, and suggest laws for settlement regulation, visit almshouse women, teach organ-playing to an advanced pupil, listen to the confidences of other protégés of the village, practise Brahms, knit, and read solemn big books in Braille, but these occupations were not scope sufficient for her. She wanted a littler life, in a sense, as she clearly saw it would be in Dina's opinion: four walls could hold it all, any cottager might have it, a pound or two a week maintain it. And that sort of domesticity she called the grandest of destinies. Though she rebuked herself now and then for her lack of public spirit, she knew quite well that she was justified, that some women are born for making homes, that without those women the whole fabric of society would sink. Madame, with all her zeal, was only bolstering up other women's homes. The girl was happier, because more in her element, sitting in the midst of some poor tenant's family, hearing strange confidences, advising how the husband was to be influenced or the children trained, than while Dina's unflagging and rather garish social economics held the field.

Joel wrote once of his novel, that story with a mother for virtual heroine, about the son who tired

of being engaged to Olive, the girl whose worth he was to dimly perceive, after he had jilted her as a skid on his career.

"I am revising early chapters," he explained. "I have gained an ounce or two of wisdom since I started them. Incidentally I am making Mrs. Munro's self-stultification more complete, as egoist Jim absorbs her vitality more and more. Mother is indignant, says that, though I have my faults, I would never tyrannise like that, and she can't see why I make another son do it."

In another of the weekly letters he said: "I write under a sense of being squashed flat. I wonder if good stuff is ever done without blind self-worship?"

"A man should adore his gifts and despise himself, shouldn't he?" went the question in reply.

But Joel smarted under a general sensation of meanness. There was the club, deserted by him out of dread of Patty; there was a desk kept horribly neat by mother, and ambition had died away; there was the office monotony burying his independent thought, and the routine at 10, Ellen Road irritating every aspiration for beauty. He smoked a great deal from nine to eleven, then lay in bed and cursed his fortunes, while the moon and stars seemed ridiculing him from behind their smoke haze.

He had enough ready money, and to spare, with

that fifty pounds not much reduced by the dust-cloak, the frock, and an evening suit for himself; need did not drive the pen; if he finished the novel, and "made a name," what good would that be, after all? A glorious letter would arrive containing Ursula's congratulations; she would perhaps say she was proud of her friend, but that would bring him no nearer to "being at one with her," which was, he believed, what he most wanted. At one intellectually — spiritually, of course. Which could not be his lot while he deceived her about Gwendolen's "love-affair." He might go to Norbys any week-end now in his own clothes, not borrowed ones, but he would not be free to wear his own soul. That was why he stopped away. Also he did not feel to have done with Patty.

The new suit was got out of its box some nights, when the house was quiet and mother would not invade his attic; the feel of the material gave him a meagre satisfaction. The purchase stood for preparation for seeing Ursula some day; yet it was always a sore-hearted, ashamed man who replaced the sheets of tissue paper between the sleeve folds. Nor could he take pride in his new tenderness of conscience. the sting of knowing he was a liar; because other fellows, he was aware, would think him an egregious fool for being such an innocent type of one.

There are moods in which having a large crime to repent would be a sop to vanity.

"Now I know I've a genius for a son," little Mrs. Hunter told him. "I own I used to wonder how it was you could be so much fonder of going out than of writing. Why, if *I* could compose a book I'm sure I'd not care to do anything else all day. Isn't it delicious to be up there, right under the slates, making something that all men will praise, even when you are 'at rest,' my darling?"

Clara's brusque, "How's the masterpiece?" was less painful to answer suitably.

What was Patty thinking of him? The explanation owing to her, after his vehement returning of those kisses, must come some night. It was a bit infamous to keep her waiting.

April had a week or two of hot weather that made everybody feel limp, though some, after the manner of Clara, tried to cure the lassitude by extra loud arguing, brisker exercise, and more aggressive interference with relatives. Mrs. Hunter grew gently peevish, wept one day because Joel called the mutton tough, and told him he never encouraged her in any way, wouldn't take the slightest interest in the neighbours, but put on a nasty, superior air when she mentioned them.

"It's his stupendous dignity; don't forget he's a

Man, and we're only fit to black his boots!" cried the sister.

Joel laughed bitterly over the phrase upstairs, which gave his anger some ease. A Man? Was he? One in leading-strings, then. And a poor specimen as to character, with a friend to whom he played the sneak, and a woman — not his really — whose eyes he shrank from meeting. Well, that ill should be conquered. As he had behaved caddishly he would go to her soon and say so. That might restore some manliness.

Patience Hunter spent a miserable day going through the processes that divide the state of being injured from the humility that sees self as injurer. While doing a lot of unnecessary cooking, at first as visible proof of how she was put upon by fate, then out of desire to atone to her boy at least through his palate, she admitted all the trials of lower, middle-class economy — but in silence; not in her crossiest mood would she have told them to another person. She met Joel at the door on his return, stroked his face, that always got to look sallow when he had fumed for some hours, and passed her finger along the edge of the high collar.

"Doesn't it rub the skin, Bear? It suits you splendidly, but I have heard that doctors say cancer comes that way."

"It's quite comfortable. How have you been getting on?"

Shutting the inner door pannelled with yellow glass, so that she had him all to herself in the four-foot lobby, she held on to one buttonhole of his coat, while her blushes came and went like a girl's.

"I *was* naughty this morning, dear; must have got out of bed the wrong side, and the tempter's never far from us, watching our weak seconds, when the kettle won't boil, or the water dries up in the saucepan, or perhaps a tumbler snaps all for nothing. You didn't think I don't love you?"

"Couldn't; not if all Heaven told me so."

"Boy, that is profanity, I'm afraid! There is some evil in us all that brings out untrue words against our will when we're upset."

"I know."

"Of course, I'm the most contented person really. What could anybody want better than this?"

The wave of her hand was not drawing attention to the mustard-coloured, glazed wall-paper that peeled off periodically, the barometer that had lost its quicksilver, the dusty, pampas grass in a ginger jar on a blue, enamelled bracket, the door knob, so spotty since Dorothy put on stuff that removed some lacquer, or the gaping letter-box through which returned MS.

fell frequently on to the shabby fibre mat. Joel understood.

"Feel like a walk to-night, little mother? You and I all alone, under the stars?"

"Oh, yes, yes — but no, Bear, I'd rather you worked. And I'll steal up now and again, as I've done before — you haven't guessed that — to make sure your pen is scratching nicely or your paper crackling. God bless and keep you. I'm but a bad-tempered mother. Still, I've *such* an apple omelette for you. Make haste down to it."

Her white silk blouse was on, black lace pinned, fichu-fashion, to subdue its youthfulness, the table was decorated with a penny bunch of primroses set in a tall vase that seemed to be swallowing them up. Joel had found a present on his desk — a large, new blotting pad.

They had "music." Mrs. Hunter sang her best song by request — "My heart's in the Highlands;" Clara pounded away at the Moonlight Sonata and the Merry Widow waltz, with deep bass notes out of harmony; Joel had to get his banjo from the cupboard under the stairs and repeat his share of the programme at the club concert. Mother had bought three penny bottles of ginger ale, from the "sweet-stuff woman at the corner," whose latest matrimonial

misfortunes had to be told, and well commented on. In the middle of the evening she reminded the "author" that he must go to his desk after one more cigarette, but he explained that his head ached, and not a sane sentence could be drawn from it to-night.

"Oh, how I do wish then . . ." began mother, but paused.

The longing had to be coaxed into words; it was that Joel would put on the evening clothes, just for half an hour if he felt uneasy in them, because else she might never see him in them, for long ere he was so famous as to wear them ordinarily she would be "with dear father." By the time he tweaked out the gas Joel was more tired than if he had done a chapter.

Next evening he would have gone to the Victory Inn, but Clara had taken her pupils to a play, his mother was obliged to go out because the butcher hadn't sent the joint, and would it damage the novel much if it was composed downstairs for once, that he might hear the bell ring, as the laundry man did swear so if he found no one in, and if he left the basket with the Normeses next door ten to one they would turn everything over, and jeer at the patches on poor, dear Clara's nightgown sleeve.

"She's got such sharp elbows, they *will* come through, and patches mayn't be any disgrace, but it isn't pleasant to be looked down on."

He might have gone round to the inn later, but could decide, without feeling ignominious, that mother ought not to be left alone after supper.

Sunday intervened, Monday was a night on which Miss Dewey was often out, being a member of a Choral Society; on Tuesday Joel, having felt absolved from another duty the previous evening and so revelled in penwork again, allowed himself to complete a chapter. Wednesday would have really seen him performing his errand of penance had not the sitting-room middle blind struck service. Everyone knows that putting new ladders into a Venetian blind is a matter of time and patience; he wrestled with the thing on the kitchen table, got exceedingly dirty, threaded the cords wrong twice, and mother became agitated lest the stares of the road would have to be encountered to-morrow without this check to curiosity.

On Thursday a note came from Mrs. Hunter's only living relation, a poor, bedridden old aunt at Barnet, begging her to go over at once, as the woman of the house was ill and unable to tend her. This was a terrible upset to the routine of 10, Ellen Road, but charity called; Patience Hunter prepared valiantly to spend "the first night in a strange bed for thirty years." Joel had to turn things out of his bag, to assist her in packing, at least in final squeezing and

locking, to pilot her in safety to Barnet, to find the abode of his aunt, which was reached at five o'clock. Luckily this innovation had occurred upon a day on which he was having a half holiday on account of being wanted to make up accounts on Saturday. Not till he was turning away, after refusing to go into the villa with her, did mother remember that this was also the special festival at his Club, in honour of his retirement from treasurership.

"I'll come for you to-morrow as soon as I'm off duty," he was saying, with his best smile under the lifted cap. "Don't let people wear you out; and it doesn't matter if you have to pay a decent wage to a nurse for the aged body. I'll settle."

"My generous boy! . . . But, Joel, I forgot the club supper. . . . Dearest, you won't be too late getting home to Clara?"

"She hasn't any nerves, as you know, and by one scream out of the window she could alarm all the road."

Mother was clutching his sleeve through the iron railing, her eyes appealing. He knew what was in her mind. It annoyed him.

"You will be . . . prudent?"

"Strictly; if I have to be police-escorted home I'll tell you all about it afterwards."

"Oh, Joel, it wasn't that——"

“ Good-night; sure you’ve enough money with you? ”

“ Plenty; I only hope I shan’t get my pocket picked if I have to go round to buy provisions. It will be wiser to leave some under aunt’s mattress. . . . Bear, you look such a dear standing there frowning, so like your father, and he was a good man, though sort of too determined at times. . . . No, I didn’t mean to find any fault with him. I was only thinking . . . ”

Joel gently detached his sleeve and moved away with a debonair wave of his cap.

“ Good-night . . . you’d better go to the invalid.”

Patty would be softened towards him by the fuss that the club members were going to make about his resignation; she might let him off easy. Still, that wasn’t the real anxiety that stirred his soul — he had got to give pain to “ a very good sort.” However, since a scene was inevitable, what a mighty comfort that he could go home at what hour he chose, unmet, unquestioned, unscrutinised, since Clara would be fast asleep as usual.

CHAPTER XVII

A CONFESSION

JOEL had time to prepare for his ordeal while sitting in the train, but he employed the leisure in resenting his mother's suspicions. By what earthly right did she consider him still the pursuer of Patty? Well, the great awakening that had come to him had not been made plain to her; she called Ursula the "poor, dear, afflicted girl," and her philosophy (every creature has one, if not more) took no count of an immense influence between man and woman that was not declared "love." Her innocent acceptance of his statement that this was friendship seemed almost insulting to-night. If a chap had an Ursula to be fond of, how could he be legitimately suspected of hankering for a Patty? One he might have married, the other he couldn't, but. . . . It was a marvel that Joel got out of the train at the right station. In the heat of his fierce annoyance had grown an equally fierce passion of another species. He even laughed aloud, to the entertainment of the ticket collector, at the idea of Ursula's lover feeling the fascination of any other woman in the universe. His

head was whirling, his heart thumping, as he strode home, before going to Merrow Street to see if there was a letter from his divinity.

Yes; but he read the typewritten sheets with such slight appreciation that they might have come from a sister. He was in the clutches of passion. This was written friendship. He would value that later, in default of passion in response. Just at the minute it had no flavour. For once in his life he thought his mother a fool. Hadn't she believed in the platonic thing now unmasked? And, so believing, had she not accused him, by implication, of running still after Patty?

In front of him was the new blotting pad, bearing the impress, backwards, of a letter he had begun to compose to Miss Dewey yesterday, and had torn up when but a third created. It naturally did not occur to him that mother, when dusting, had seen the non-committal, yet affectionate, first lines, had read them, against the light. Nothing but "Dear Patty," and explanations about work having prevented his turning up at the Victory as usual; but what parent could have liked the familiar opening?

He was utterly ignorant of the fact that Mrs. Judd that very morning had described Miss Dewey as "goin' nercessant into the City, no doubt ter lunch with somebody." Mrs. Hunter had refused to be

anxious, and we all know what happens then. For the meanness of reading blotting paper backward she had atoned, in will at all events, by rejecting the notion that her reformed boy could be meeting the hussy secretly, and by trying to forgive him for using the siren's Christian name. Christian indeed! Nothing less than the shock of having to travel to Barnet, to "sleep away from home after thirty years," could have blocked out the Club evening from her memory. So Joel let his anger rise, as an alleviation for love, and then flung anger from him, to give himself up fully to the dear misery.

Had he known the truth all the weeks? Had it only this hour existed for him? His brains were too disturbed to answer; his immersion in a sea of hopeless ecstasy drowned reflection.

Next minute he was calm. The man had conquered the boy — a difficult affair when the boy is twenty-nine.

Instead of crouching by his table, brow Byronically sunk in hands, he got up steadily and walked to the mantelshelf, four inches wide, where was the portrait of Ursula, with her shade. Very erect, he saluted it, raising the cap that he had not doffed on entering his home. His face was full of the peace that comes when the major feeling of a life has just been adopted. This expression is somewhat rare, because

few men have chief feelings by choice, fewer still give a permanent home to any. Joel was not a fine fellow in his own opinion, decidedly flawed, but he happened to be so made that he stuck to people. Therefore love would belong to one girl alone when he had given it. And this was the precise time of the offering. Ursula was not there to refuse or accept; if she had been he was sure he would not have explained the gift, but it had become hers by one of those dedications that need no printing.

Patty Dewey thought her success was at hand as he smiled into her eyes ten minutes later, and let himself be welcomed as guest of the evening.

"I am most awfully sorry I haven't been round before," he said. "I seem to have had a conglomeration of things to settle since I came back."

Flutterings went on under the yellow satin and black net of the worthy landlady's best gown, tears welled up as she listened to the speeches preceding the presentation to her chosen man of a marble and ormolu clock, trickled down during his admirably modest acknowledgment of his associates' kindness. He was sorry to leave his post, he hoped often to come among them, and would always be ready to take part in any special celebrations; it was the being more or less bound to attend constantly that he had to give up. For some years he had enjoyed rubbing

mind with their minds, and been cheered by the good comradeship.

There was wine to-night, at his expense, after the complimentary supper; he drank so much more than usual that Patty wondered what the effect would be, yet, when the fatal hour of eleven was approached, she thought him cooler and more reserved than upon entry. She disappeared from the scene, leaving the barmaid to request the more lively "boys" to recollect the honour of the house. It was her ruse; either Joel would be guilty of shocking rudeness to the hostess, or he must come to her "office" to say good-bye.

His step soon clattered on the cobble-stones, but, instead of peering over the flower-pots on the window-sill, as usual, he tapped at the door leading from the yard, and, obeying her injunction, came in.

Immediately she saw him crossing the jute carpet — a majestic air on him — she knew that the extreme softness of his manner heralded pain for her. "A fine figure of a man," she told herself, as he came close, stood by her at the fireside, still with that straight gaze, but all the satirical lines turned into scorn of himself and the errand that brought him — the necessity of the errand.

"You've been thinking me a brute, and you have

loads of reason. Since we kissed each other I have woke up to a love that's different, a more vital sort. I should have told you so if I hadn't been a coward."

It was some wretched satisfaction to make him take both her fat, beringed hands and hold them, but she was not prepared to have one bent over and kissed, as he added:

"I beg your pardon, Patty. Though that isn't much use, is it?"

"Don't, Joe," she stammered. "I'm not a society lady, don't go behavin' as you would to a reigning sovereign. It sort of hurts."

Joel held the hands in a great firm grasp instead. But he hadn't anything more to say at once.

"You've found some swell girl, I suppose, down at Norbys?"

"Nobody I can marry."

"But I . . . It wasn't marriage you used to think about with me, Joe, that's why I had to hold you off, being a . . . an honourable woman."

"Yes, I imagined that marrying you in the future, when . . . well, never mind when . . . would put matters right in your view, if we lived together meanwhile. I was a skunk, I suppose, but that was the extent of it."

"I wasn't high class enough for your people."

“ You were for me ; you are now ; it isn’t *that* about the other . . . girl . . . that has changed me.”

Miss Dewey’s bosom heaved, a temptation to be nasty was upon her, so she let fling just a little, hating herself all the while.

“ You think I believe you’d have married me, after, I suppose? ”

Joel was astounding ; his eyes were as honest as a baby’s, and he continued to meet her gaze, though he flinched.

“ No, dear ; I don’t. Pledges of the species aren’t kept generally. And I’m as bad a liar as most men, only I came here to speak truth to you, and I’ve done it.”

Suddenly her arms swept round his neck, her head came where he had often schemed to bring it, nice warm bare arms, nice black hair, and a nice pink and white complexion.

“ Don’t be a noodle, and fret for the moon, dear Joe. You’re such a lonely looking chap, as though you’d got into a tight hole and was being bored to death in it. Since the other girl’s not to be had what does she matter? Forget that you’ve ever seen her. And when you’re cured of the fancy why, let us get married secretly. You never seem to have had the gumption to think of that. It’s not being known for your wife I stick out for, just the ring, dear, and

all in order. Not the ring either to wear. Not a soul need guess."

Joel lifted the head, by hands against the ears, held it a little distance off, and his look again told her he was somebody else's.

The impulse to be nasty had speedily succumbed; the resolution to win him still proved as feeble.

"There, don't for goodness sake worry, I see you can't help it."

"Bless you!" cried Joel, letting the face go. "What a brick you are! I knew you were a woman in a thousand; that made rascally conduct viler. If I'd only written you budgets of letters with proposals in them I should feel cleaner now. Not that you'd use them."

He led her to the rep couch, and they sat there, fingers interlaced. To his dismay she began to sob; for, once her plotting, and the play-acting that keeps a woman up, were proved no use, the whole import of the loss smote her. The sobs rose in sound and strength, as the noise of a signalled train, threatening some tremendous cataclysm when the unimpedable force attains its climax. The abandonment caused more abandonment, her vehemence got beyond her own control, her choked cries deafened her. To all Joel's petitions that she would restrain this grief — he was seriously alarmed for her — she gave no intel-

ligible reply. Burying her comely face in a patchwork cushion was a concession to his trouble, but the sobbing only turned into a hollow roar.

Joel's theory was that she must cry it all out, and would then recover permanently, but as no sign of diminution appeared he decided that she would make herself ill, though sickness and Patty could scarcely be associated in fancy. Being a man, brandy was his next thought.

Dashing from the room to fetch some, from the bar, if it wasn't locked up, he ran into the frightened barmaid who, not daring to intrude, was listening at the keyhole, not from malice, but to be in readiness if dear Miss Dewey wanted her when the quarrel was over. For surely nothing but a big row was . . .

Picking her off her knees upon which his abrupt exit had flung her the man implored,

"For heaven's sake, do something."

Miraculous seemed the effect of another woman's arrival on the scene. Patty sat up, gave several dabs to her hair and then to her eyes, the sobs sank gradually, like the noise of a train that speeds into distance; she laughed a little, wept in the same breath, and managed to pant out,

"Oh, you dear kind people, what *are* you both looking ghastly for? Didn't you ever see tears before, either of you? Go to bed, Bella; it isn't re-

spectable, but you won't misunderstand, and I want to talk sensibly to Mr. Hunter after making such a ninny of myself. He's the best sort, mind you."

"Por' darlin'! . . ." said the barmaid, not meaning Joel.

"No brandy; soda water," Patty contradicted, when her attendants had fetched a decanter. "I can take spirits when I want to look festive, or it's complimentary to somebody, for a funeral, christening, or wedding, but you've no notion how I loathe the reek I'm in hourly. . . . There, drink some of the nice plain frizzy stuff, too, Joel. . . . We wasn't quarrelling, never shall, Bella, but Mr. Hunter brought me some upsettin' news. Go along, dear. And don't forget to take the silver punch bowl with you."

As soon as the door was shut again she turned to the man, with a nod of encouragement, and a gasp of recovery.

"Lucky you've no Mother sittin' up for you to-night. It doesn't matter about lookin' unvirtuous when you're sufferin' for virtue, and I never did deign to avoid gossip. In my run of business, especially when you're too young for it, the only style to get on is the bravado one, the 'I'm as good as anybody' sort. You used to carry on so too, but I suppose the swell young lady has altered that policy

in you. Well, dear — I've always run fair, I'll go on doing it to the end of the chapter, please the Lord, so, since it's not coming on, our love affair, as I thought certain it was, we'd best not see much of each other — leastways not till I've got accustomed to being jilted."

"I know. You can rely . . ."

"Stop, my dear . . . don't fly off at any tangent. . . . I want you to come to the club now and then, give me a look in at the window, in the old fashion. Will you?"

"I'll be glad to."

"And will you promise me something?"

"It would be a relief to find out a method of pleasing you."

"You think you *can't* marry the . . . the . . ."

"She wouldn't accept me, I'm rough, beside the men she is accustomed to seeing. And I wouldn't ask her. It would trouble her to dismiss me; we're capital chums."

"Then, Joel Hunter, will you agree not to marry any one else but her or me?"

"I am willing to swear it by all that's sacred," said the lover.

CHAPTER XVIII

DENOUNCED

WHEN there is much artist in a man he can view a crisis, or a person, from far away, as soon as he has left off being in emotional relationship with either. Patty no longer stood for liberty and sex for Joel. She was still a capital sort, he had a regard for her that obliged sincere regrets for his inconsiderate conduct, yet, as he lit a cigarette on his way home, and exchanged courtesies with the policeman he tipped occasionally, he was amused by the scene just emerged from. If this was heartless, then fiction writers are a cruel class. He would have done a great deal for her, at much cost to himself, but he could not help seeing how excellent a stage character she would make. The watching her in hysterics, fussed over by Bella, had introduced the absurd element into the interview.

Chalk Farm neighbourhood was at its most innocuous state, the air was as pure as it ever can be, at that witching hour of a new morning's infancy; theatre and party goers had disappeared into the trap-like houses that held them as individuals, in com-

partments; the few persons about the streets were nefarious, or looked nervous of being thought so, except when a string of vegetable-laden carts creaked by, attended by yokels, and a doctor, in a motor at top speed, flashed forth from a square into darkness. No doubt Ellen Road objected to young Hunter's energetic step; he had not realised how disreputable it sounded, a noisy defiance to commentators upon life-respectable. Second nature would have made him moderate the ring of his heels if he had consulted his watch. For Quaker forebears cannot be prevented from interfering with the instincts, and a training by such a particular moralist as Patience Hunter achieves wonders. Joel was no prig; he had the sense to separate the exaggerations of her ideas from the beauty of them; he was no profligate, except for a half-fledged scheme, because heredity and upbringing combined to give him love of purity. His use of his own intelligence had mitigated the narrowness, without spoiling the poetry, of his environment.—Environment?—He was in Ellen Road, pushing his latch-key into the door of a common little building named "Marlborough," but always, by his wish, mentioned as No. 10; the existence of anything poetic within seemed problematical, but nevertheless, poesy flourished. No good woman fails to create it as an atmosphere about her. No man grap-

ples with selfishness, and is humbled by his consciousness of insincerities, without being himself a poet.

The key wouldn't go in. Then some hand dragged the door open, some figure stepped back hurriedly into the parlour, where a candle was guttering on a what-not.

"What on earth made you wait up, old girl?"

Having released his unwanted key and bolted the door Joel advanced to confront his sister with more remonstrances, but it was mother who stood, trembling from head to foot, very white about the face, and waved him back, with a candlestick.

"Don't come near — don't touch me. I wonder you like to try . . . coming straight from that woman . . . I travelled all the way home alone, I wasn't likely to remain to sleep in a strange bed when I wasn't really needed — the quarrel with the landlady had been made up, she was not ill, and aunt and she had come to terms. . . . Oh, Joel, Joel, did I give you birth for . . . for *this*? . . . You *have* been with the creature. Don't lie to me."

"I was with Miss Dewey till ten minutes ago, merely talking."

"Why call her that now — when on your blotting paper it was 'My dear Patty'? . . . Your effrontery . . . standing there with your back against the wall and your eyes so bold! . . . Haven't you any

sense of shame? I suppose it's too late for that? . . . Mothers don't count, decency doesn't matter now-a-days."

Joel set his teeth, and waited. To begin to speak now would be to let fling words he knew he would want to recapture.

Mother was shaking so that the candle-light wobbled, and made the vision of her a blur for him. He put out a hand to grip her as she skirted by him to the foot of the stairs, but she cried out, as though he hurt her.

"Keep away from me! I'm entitled to that much respect, though I *have* been a wicked woman. If I hadn't married out of the Society this curse wouldn't have fallen on me. . . . And *how* I've prayed up in your room to-night . . . lovingly."

"Listen, dear," he said firmly. "You are inventing all the misery for yourself. My depravity is summed up in just what I told you."

She wheeled round on the third stair.

"I don't believe you."

She saw his shoulders shrug, as a sign that he gave up the contest. "You've been drinking — your breath is full of smoke and wine. . . . I cannot be deceived any longer. . . . You aren't fit to be in a decent home, but go to your room . . . sit down and remember you're before your God . . . if you aren't

too fashionable to believe in Him. . . . And that dreadful journey — with the carriages all crowded, and porters no use, and motors rushing all over the roads! . . . I might have been brought home on a stretcher. How would you have felt then? But no doubt you would have been glad to be freer, not to have to wait till my back was turned to go to your mistress. . . . Your father was a good man. . . . *Let Clara hear* — nothing matters any longer. . . . You cost me a lot once . . . months of laying up, and then agony . . . but it was nothing to this pain. . . . Go — . . . look into your black soul, . . . and don't try to come near me."

It was some minutes after her bedroom door had shut before Joel recovered his temper sufficiently to mount to his attic. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, crossed his arms on his breast, and meditated. There was but one being who would understand him always — Ursula.

For a man of twenty-nine years of age to sit up, on a cold April morning, because his mother had accused him falsely of immorality, might be ludicrous, but Joel paid her that deference. The various shades of gray trod on one another's heels, until the sudden leap that one of much paler colour always seems to triumphantly achieve, that brings the hue which can be really called daylight. Shortly after that, street

noises usher in another long spell of the world's business. Joel was cold, too, and he did not relish discomfort at any time.

Little considerations have much weight in domestic tragedies. The alarum clock would not pierce his dreams if he let himself sleep now, and mother certainly would not wake him; so he put a dressing-gown over his suit, until the hour for having a cold bath, and sought a book to calm his fury. One was handy, on the cushion of the armchair. He did not recollect having left one there. . . . Ah—it was mother's, the jealously guarded Quaker volume that lived in her petticoat pocket. To that she had gone for guidance in the terrible decision how to manage a profligate. Some fibres of his heart softened, some tension lessened in his head. . . . Poor little woman! . . . So she thought all his vileness was the punishment, or the result, of her drop from duty in those emotional, passionate years of her own when, unable to resist love, she had consented to wed her doctor out of Society. Till the last sun sets on a scene of disorder we may all rely on our own conceptions of sin creating our tests. Best conduct is not virtue till we choose it as that.

The date written after the name of Patience Underwood, on the title page, was a very early one; the

cover of the book had lost its sharp corners, the leaves had turned yellow. Joel handled them reverently. After his anger, his scorn about the blotting-paper, he was capable of a resumption of a degree of tenderness towards his insulter, not yet of meekness. He fancied that was because it was Ursula's friend who had been reviled unjustly. Patty would have been his mistress if he could have contrived it — yes; — but Ursula's star had risen since then. Obviously the honour was all due to Ursula. Mother was a naughty little woman in a mad passion.

But one must forgive some rages — those that announce fervours. In this book he found her excuses.

“To the Christian mother the precious infant is committed, with the implied charge on behalf of its Heavenly Parent — Take this child and nurse it for Me.

“How seldom are the responsibilities thus involved, and how needful that the parental obligations should not be put aside or turned away from, under any feeling of discouragement or want of qualification. It is not on the highly-gifted parent alone that the duty is imposed of training up children in the fear of God, and in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures; it is a charge laid on every parent, and

the sense of own insufficiency, however deeply felt, will prove no valid plea for neglect when we are called to account for the trust committed to our keeping."

"I'm the trust," Joel told himself, a tendency to smile wrinkling the corners of his mouth. "Nobody could fear 'poor dear Clara's' being immoral. . . . Ugh, what a brute I am!"

The cold bath, and redressing, accomplished, he descended to the kitchen, lit the gas-stove and had almost laid breakfast when his sister came down, clad in a bulky garment she called her morning robe, and remarked, between yawns,

"'Pon my word, it's jolly to have a baby brother. . . . Pay you back for this in Brahms, old boy. Mother doesn't seem in any hurry this morning, says she had to wait up for you; and so we haven't to order her to stop in bed. . . . Was she raspy?"

"Naturally. I didn't return till the early hours."

"Whew! . . . I say . . . can't you draw it mild? . . . You don't want to get like young Bates three doors down, do you?"

"I gave the mother my explanation — she didn't believe it, probably you wouldn't — but settle it between you. That's Dorothy falling over the milk can — cut me some sandwiches, there's a dear."

"Lor', we're mighty affectionate."

Office, a lunch taken on an empty bus top during the dinner hour, some strong coffee at five o'clock, made up Joel's day, except for thoughts that came and went tumultuously; but he did not rhapsodise even to himself. Love took him simply. Indignation subsided into one small burn somewhere deep in his nature.

Mother was shut up in her bedroom when he returned, Clara was out. To a question spoken through the door Mrs. Hunter responded icily,

"I am not taken ill — very busy sewing — and I do not wish to see, or hear you."

The house was silent after that, Joel writing in the attic, Mrs. Judd, minding the place, on Dorothy's evening out, devouring a threepenny novel on the copper. He encountered her later, when the cracked, tin-backed gong told him supper was ready. Her glance was more cunning than ever, she pursued her habitual policy of being best friends with the person most in evidence.

"Cooked you a bit of the 'addick — there'll be loads fer breakfast, don't know what yer ma will say ter me though. . . . Don't you worrit, sir; she'll climb down when she's tired. . . . That's how my mother-in-law carries on, an' I'll see termorrow, when I'm comin' ter spring-clean the drorin'-room, what I can do with 'er."

"You mean well, but your remarks are impertinent to . . ."

"There you go . . . turnin' the other cheek, I calls it! . . . Yer ma's quite right, of course, 'aven't I said so? But young men will be young men there's no denyin', and you've waited long enough ter stand up for yer rights, as Miss Clara says of wimmen's. Stop out a hour later ternight, sir, then you'll hear no more of it."

If Mrs. Judd had not clapped the door to at that instant, and fled out to the front doorstep where remonstrances would have become public property, Joel would have certainly delivered a rebuke. She was in the back garden, hanging out clothes and whistling the Soldiers' Chorus, by the time he finished supper, it being her peculiar method to do those works by night that other char-ladies perform of a morning.

Joel went to bed without any attempt to say good-night to mother, and before Clara, the immediate possessor of a latch key, returned from a lecture on "Our Tyrants."

The thin graceful old figure was in the chair at the end of the table next breakfast time, and his heart gave an unreasonable leap as he saw it, and came to bend over her. But the mouth was twisted into a tight line.

"No kissing, please. It's my duty to see that you have your food. Clara is very tired, poor child."

"Can't I persuade you to believe my word yet?"

"No."

That meal was eaten in silence. Joel was on his dignity. A slight relaxing of the stiffness was observable as supper was taken. Clara tried to draw the combatants together by praising Joel to mother, and mother to Joel, before their faces, but peace-making was an occupation so foreign to her tastes that it was not surprising that she failed. A shindy in which social or political aims were not concerned seemed to her waste of energy; when she was most aggressive she was usually best tempered. Finding her efforts boring as well as foiled she told the antagonists, privately, what she thought of them, and abandoned attempts at reconciliation. Besides, during the rest of the week she was "up to her ears" in appeal writing for a Guild for providing working mothers with creche money.

On Sunday Joel went to church with them; it was not often that he cried off. Coming home up Ellen Road Patty met them, and he gave her his finest bow, with a grave smile that his mother was struck by. They did not look like fellow sinners.

The novel progressed excellently that evening, aided by frequent stares at Ursula's portrait, and a

preliminary re-reading of her three last letters. The secret of industry was really that he was her man now, though she didn't know it; bound, therefore, to do something creditable.

Nobody suggested music after supper, Clara was still laboriously copying an epistle, but he played the piano softly for his own benefit.

When Mrs. Hunter said, "It's bedtime, Clara, and you know you're trying your eyes," he looked round to ascertain if they were going upstairs, then, seeing that the papers had been swept up, and mother's book laid aside, he addressed them jointly.

"Goodnight to you both. I shall smoke outside for a while. I won't forget the gas, and the inner door bolt."

It might have been hours after he got to sleep, or almost at once, he could not tell, that he woke with the consciousness that some one was in his room, very close. The luminous matchbox was handy, so a feeble gleam soon showed him the kneeling form, the tear-dotted cheeks, and quivery lips, of his troublesome little mother. Lighting the candle, leaning on one elbow, he waited for her to speak first.

"I was sure I should know for certain if I saw you asleep. . . . How I used to wrap you round with the clothes ever so many times in a night, because you *would* throw your feet out — and you double one fist

into your throat in just the same way now, as though you wanted to choke yourself."

"You're silly, dearest, to distress yourself so about a mistake."

The old hands came over the eiderdown quilt, and held on to his shoulder.

"Hasn't your conscience really any big burden? . . . Haven't you *anything* to reproach yourself with?"

It was necessary to fence, if truth was to be served.

"Sorry. I can't answer when I'm not believed."

"I'd try. . . . Oughtn't you to give up ever seeing her? . . . Oh, think, if God sent for you to-night?"

"I won't cut Miss Dewey. There's no risk."

"There must be wicked thoughts, because you once . . ."

"Oh, leave out impossible requests. I want to get you happy again, but . . . there are . . ."

"I know," she interrupted quickly, laying her fingers on his lips. "You shall have the road made easy, if you will only come back, Bear. I was wrong to reproach you in anger, children should be led to His feet Who was merciful. . . . But when you came straight from her, oh, then, it seemed more than my pride could endure."

"I've pride too — you wouldn't accept truth."

"Was it true?"

"Absolutely . . ."

Patience Hunter showed spirit still.

"Such a shameful time to come home! . . . But . . . kiss me, my darling. . . . And try to forgive about the . . . the blotting-paper."

Joel's embrace was not lacking in heartiness.

"There — for Heaven's sake, dry those forget-me-nots!" he cried, "and remember that, if I come home at *any* hour of morning your fears won't be reasonable."

"And you'll pray . . . Joel, my baby?"

"Oceans," he promised.

CHAPTER XIX

THE OLD, OLD STATEMENT

MAY and June are the most afflicting months of the year in those mean, pretentious streets that are a draggle-tail fringe on the skirts of London. Citywards there is majesty close by squalor; the west centre is antique as well as literary; Westminster still preserves a certain dignity; Chelsea and Kensington are poetic and royal; dockland tells of empire; but in the outer districts, where live families all trying to seem better off than they are, and a copy of social high life is carried on in front of the scenery, household tasks pursued under cover of dusk or "at the back," the coming of summer is somehow shameful. In Ellen Road dustbins had never smelt as stale, cats had never prowled and yelled as constantly; cheap finery had a novel gaudiness, manners grew slovenly in proportion as they too were over dressed. The Hunters were ultra refined for the little area made up of three streets or so, one running down, two crossing; and the Jinks girls, divining this, jeered and tossed their heads whenever encountered.

Patience Hunter suffered most; Joel had his mind

circle, Clara liked things to look squalid and vulgar because she could put all that down to the evil of present laws and the need for some sort of emancipation; the mother, delicate and aging, yearned for the sea, which had always represented her idea of rest, broke out into irritable words, for which tearful repenting was hard, but obligatory, and hated herself for knowing that "the little home" was shabby. Peace was established, her boy had come back to her, yet in his increased gravity she read lingering resentment which was far from his feelings. One may learn even from a Mrs. Judd; he had taken to going long walks by night, in the coolest hours at his command, and was never questioned about his lateness. The treats that he arranged for his feminine folk made breaks in routine — motor drives on some Sunday afternoons, concerts at the Queen's Hall, an explorer's lecture at the Albert Hall, evening service at St. Paul's, a steamboat trip and late dinner — but his older manner was on him all the time, reminding mother that he was not just her baby to pet and keep in order.

When Ursula's letters entered No. 10 it might have been a palace, as far as Joel's sensations were influenced, indeed, he would have found the grand abode less harmonious; for he and she inhabited that realm which has no limits, in which spirit and sense stand

perfectly related, and prove that, in their combination, humanity is kingly and queenly. But the great joy was that his work was being done for her. There were no wild fevers of despair because she was not for him; he had himself excellently in hand, and the toil was the earnest endeavour to give her cause to be proud of his success. Of course he had long ago assured her that if it arrived she would have sent it. Ursula had no more fault to find with his letters; they overflowed many large pages weekly, being scribbled in trains, on gate tops when he penetrated by night into building estates of Finchley, and during tea shop lunches; they poured out his ambitions, plots, views on ethics, opinions of modernity as shown by plays, pictures, and the books of his contemporaries. Political arguments were deeply fascinating now because they had got into the "I think . . . Don't you?" stage that can impart life to any skeleton. Harriet, the old servant, must have wished the gentleman had less leisure, or a better handwriting, but she never commented.

In the second week of June Joel finished his novel, and sent it to be typed. Then he wanted Ursula most dreadfully.

By some odd impulse of chivalry he told Patty all about the story one night, between eleven and eleven thirty, sitting on the rep sofa, pleasing her further

by sipping liqueur at her expense, and smoking a first-class cigar. He could never enter the office without remembering that she would make the fortunes of a drawing-room comedy, but his bearing towards her was so kindly that she misunderstood its significance. Since he could not marry "some lord's daughter," as she imagined, and had sworn to marry no one else but her, she was often so convinced that ultimately she would be Mrs. Hunter as to decide on a costume for the secret wedding.

"Joel, why on earth didn't you put love-making into it?" she asked, aghast. "And you could do it so beautiful."

"Olive does love Jim; he proposes to her by telegram, and she gives him up readily, at great sacrifice of herself, when she sees being engaged is crippling to his egoistical career-making."

"You shirked, with that telegram."

"Yes, I admit it. What use to write an inferior love duologue, when it was the merest self indulgence to the chap, as unimportant as ordering a dozen of champagne on the spur of the moment?"

"But the public thinks such a deal of champagne," said Patty, with a wise look. "I see what you're driving at, that it wasn't a genuine love affair. Then you might have put in another couple's. I've no doubt it's a *chef d'œuvre*, Joel, but I'm not as hopeful

as you that it will be sold all over the bookstalls."

Smiling involuntarily at her pronunciation, he promised that his next story should be of love and love's importance.

After a few evenings of taking mother out, sometimes of escorting Clara to meetings and fetching her home after them, of playing the piano, or roaming on the rim of Enfield, he found himself growing restless beyond endurance. The future loomed up out of every bush, the sight of commonplace children towed along by Cockney young parents, and the plain speech in some scenes of two plays, threatened to change his comradeship with Ursula, and his unaspiring love for her, into the ordinary fret he had resolved it should not be. Poignant dissatisfaction was derogatory to the gain that was his. So, with the most sensible of motives, he asked for a day's holiday, and went to spend it with her, that he might be duly impressed again with the magnificence of her folk's position and his own general scrubbiness in comparison with her refinement. Inwardly he knew he was refined too, indeed he thought his the better kind, made out of nothing much. She had been educated and bred for an aristocrat; his nature was moulded by a maternal creator of the lower middle class, and his bringing-up had lacked distinction. He hadn't much recollection of his father, only of

some whackings, and a juvenile idea that such a busy man ought not to have had a family.

As the return train left Abbeyvalley at 6.30, the evening clothes were not taken; he made such an early start that the journey down was over by nine o'clock, and he hired a bicycle to take him swiftly to Norbys. Leaving this with the lodge-keeper he took the route through the grounds to the west entrance, that was used only by callers on the blind girl, or by members of the household. He had not sent word of his coming.

"One hundred and twenty windows." This fact, culled from a guide book description of the Priory, rang in his brain as he caught sight, now and then, of turrets above the lines. Ellen Road had looked extra dingy when he had left it in the pride of the young morning. The curative effect of his trip was already working, then? He felt leagues distant from Ursula.

It was not possible to resist the appeal of the rose garden to be noticed; such marvels of colour waited at every turn, individual blooms, bowl shaped, or tapering, immense and firm, caught his eye; weeping branches swept his feet, wild rebel boughs tried to delay his advance. The walks he had sauntered in last February and March had become wildernesses in which the visitor might stray bewildered. He was making his first real acquaintance with the gardens

of the wealthy, learning what the daughter of great folk grows up beside.

Turf had replaced gravel beneath his tread, and he was wondering if he would ever find the track that led to the west entrance, when, rounding a bend, he found Ursula touching him. She was in an attitude of listening, soft though his footfall had been, but he did not think at all, nor did she; their arms went around each other, hers about his neck, his enfolding her waist and shoulders, and cheek rested against cheek.

“How did you know?”

“Blind sight, Joel, and perhaps . . . the soap, dear . . . God be thanked!”

Then they kept quite still, realising.

Joel seemed to himself to pass through all manner of barriers, to rout mocking devils, to conquer legions of foes, who were individual embodiments of his own pride. And the queerest part was that, by the victory, he grew prouder than before. He had thought his dedication to his girl complete when he had stood before her portrait, but it had not been; this was the final; future calls on his fidelity would be easily answered. That was why he took the case so simply when they discussed it. Brusquely, as was his way, he summed up the situation, as it most concerned them.

"This is the real thing, you know."

"And we called it friendship . . . But I knew first: I should be ashamed . . . no, I shouldn't . . . to say how soon I loved you."

The beginning of his grasp frightened her, not of him, but of the heaviness of the burden she must be to him later.

"We aren't going to run away from our responsibility," said Joel, with a triumphant laugh. "It's natural."

"A woman with no eyes, not even eyelids! Joel, what have I said? You gave me no chance to refuse you."

"Do it now, if you dare."

The attempt at rebellion was ended. Standing there, among roses in June, was ideal, yet some strength in this man always set him seeking the wholesome every day.

"I know where I am now; come to the old summer-house where we can thrash the business out with no danger of being interrupted."

A door in a wall gave access to a plot of ground that was destined to inclusion in the rose garden but was at present given up to cabbages and apple trees. Leading Ursula from the floral paradise to a spidery hut that had been banished from the decorative grounds, gave him intense pleasure. Up in the cor-

ner of the little building, out of the sunshine, he put one hand out for her two, and then laughed again at her.

"I'm still waiting to be dismissed. Can't you manage it?"

"I ought to, unless you are . . ."

"There's one thing you can do to help me out, dear; undertake to be content with a small house, and only enough luxury to make you comfortable, chairs that run about on wheels, the latest of musical instruments, etc., niches in walls to hold your flowers, speaking tubes galore. Of course you will have to keep it going, or we can't get married till mother isn't living. The income I can detach from her and Clara isn't worth mentioning."

"I hate display, Joel. I've had no rich dresses, but those that were embroidered in the village. Can you bear it?"

"For you, for my gain of you. Don't let us minimise the fact, or scamp plain speaking of it, we want each other so much that nothing else really matters. It's love with nothing left out, as it should be. We were born for that, the strong passion that friendship merges in. Lots of poor devils don't experience the blend, some because they won't wait for it, some through poverty of spirit, others out of general flabbiness. I haven't begged you not to fancy I'm after

your fortune, so you mustn't implore me not to put up with a blind wife. See? "

" While your fingers are round mine I can understand all that is in your heart, I believe. . . . But I shall never look at you! . . . Oh, that's hard for me."

" I'm such an ordinary mortal that you don't lose much; besides you know I'm a lean, muscular young man with a scrubby brown moustache; I haven't forgotten a syllable of the sketch. People will tell you you're a fool to trust me, I shall be abominably congratulated on bringing off such a fine dodge. The prospect of being forbidden the house by your father, or kicked out, metaphorically, by your brother, hasn't occurred to me, doesn't now, as practical politics. They're above that. But it will be a blow for them, so I'll try to be meek and reasonable, Ursula. The vital fact is our need of each other."

" Yes."

Why was there a reserve in her tone? The masterful person asked for an explanation. The girl looked somewhat wan and white, in spite of her splendid healthfulness.

" I'll tell you . . . in a minute. Joel . . ."

He waited, watching her.

" We are out of the sunshine, but of course it isn't dark at all in here? "

"No, you poor innocent — but come further along the bench into the warmth."

"Let my hands go, for a moment."

With a quick movement she raised them both to the back of her head, the fingers fumbled an instant in the brown hair, and then the black shade fell on to her lap. It was her turn to wait — but Joel's touch on the scars, and in the awful hollows, was his answer; his big fingers seemed trying to take away the ugliness.

"It's amazing that I don't hurt you — I suppose all pain is over, my dear?"

"Yes; but you don't shudder at the sight?"

"It's horrible because it's such a loss. There's a picture in the gallery that told me what you were like."

"It's repulsive."

"Never to me."

"It was to some one once — a boy I grew up near, who was so precious then, at the time that portrait was painted, that I thought I could some day feel willing to marry him. He meant to ask me, then he saw me without this shade, and so he went away. His letter explaining was the saddest I ever read in my life."

"You see he wasn't in love," said Joel. "I like the old fashioned phrase, don't you? Don't have any

more accidents, but if you lost all the dear face, and limbs too, you'd still be Ursula. What crowds you have to learn yet — and the joke is you know really. Women like to be told things over and over again. That's an item in the blessedness they offer. I was talking just now as though we could be married very quickly, but it strikes me your father will want us to wait."

The shade was over her face again; she was holding by one hand on to the square shoulder nearest to her as they sat in the sunshine.

"For us to make sure of our feelings, Joel," she laughed. "How silly it sounds."

He was lost in thought, out of which he brought the remark:

"It's ripping that you're rich. But I can't chuck the clerkship that keeps No. 10 going. Ursie, you haven't the vaguest guess at the utter commonness of our establishment; it isn't the fetching in coals, or the blacking one's own boots outside the back step, beside a leaking oil barrel, it's next door neighbour's windows and washing, bargains with rag and bone men, rows with owners of yelping dogs, smells of rooms that can't have fires or ventilation enough. If you'd be exposed to mother's daily life, I couldn't take you; let alone that I've no money to spare for wife maintenance — or children."

Ursula put her pointed chin down on the muscular upper arm.

"I hope the being made master of a nicer home will make up to you — oh, I remember — a *small*, non-luxurious home, fit for zealous Radicals."

"Make up? . . . Only *that*?"

They let the world of bees, birds, and butterflies go by them, sensible butterflies that sought humdrum cabbages — he seeing everything through a golden haze of dreams, practical though he was, she blind to all around, but acutely conscious of the feel of the tweed sleeve and of her possession of the man who was willing to take her money.

"If father, Gwen, and Vin are doubtful, will you agree to be patient?"

"Seeing you often. We have whole libraries to say to each other."

"Let us write a note to them, send it by a gardener, then have all this day to ourselves, wandering."

She pencilled the explanation — in French, since an envelope was lacking — Joel holding her wrist straight; having despatched the news they left the gardens for the park, the park for the lanes. Their meals they bought, piece by piece, in little wayside shops, and ate in the woods. Miss Nuton, of Norbys Priory, was gloveless, clad in a gray skirt, pale blue cap and jersey; they walked arm in arm, as coun-

try sweethearts do after work hours. The number of her people's windows had become a matter of no consequence.

Yet, viewed from their side, their conduct was splendidly unsentimental. The bliss was in being together, in having settled that they would share everything — for eternity.

As Joel had said, this was the real thing; there was no necessity for speaking much about it.

She would have enjoyed blacking his boots in the objectionable area he had described. He was positively eager to be eyes for her.

CHAPTER XX

THE MAGNANIMOUS NUTONS

THE Nutons were once more in conference, the father in his library revolving chair, Gwendolen sprawling her arms over the table, drumming fingers on a white vellum copy of Aristotle, Vincent standing cool, cynical, yet amiable, by the pedestal that held a bust of Marie Antoinette. Ursula's French note lay on the Squire's knee; it had been read aloud, nobody had made least fun of it, they were too well bred to refuse romance its due; still the engagement announced was, they agreed, impossible.

"An excellent chap, Hunter, whose rational mind, having perceived his opportunity, has provoked him to pursue it. The sturdy sense I've always commended in him could scarcely have done otherwise."

"But our Ursie isn't to be victimised, Vin. How to get her out of his clutches without distressin' her too much?"

"I am astounded," said old Mr. Nuton. "We feared Hunter no more than Rogers, or Pentecost. She has always had her pets."

Vincent leaned gracefully on one elbow, beneath the neck of the unfortunate *grande dame*.

"The pressure of Providential retaliation is at work; Madame has instilled into Ursie the I've-no-right-to-stand-alooof creed that is more dangerous Socialism than Burns ever sang. Madame is ousted, in favour of the Radical whose Radicalism is of the sturdy type that doesn't want patronage. The way the man bore himself here was sublime. We could never polish him into a fit Nuton connection. As a clerk, with a soul, he is immense; as one of us he would be ridiculous, and a constant irritant."

"I wish you wouldn't spout views, Vin," cried the sister petulantly. "I ask what's goin' to be done?"

"Ursula is her own mistress."

"Yes, father, but devoted to us. Insist on there being no pledge, no correspondence, for five years. Billie is coming."

"You forget, my dear, that I should have to act consummately; the part of pathetic parent is a hard one for an unemotional man. However, I will talk most seriously to her, and explain the genuine trouble that this indignity is to me."

Vincent laughed then, and drew himself up.

"No, sir, you shall be spared. I see that I must come to the rescue of the situation; diplomacy is the sole weapon by which we can honourably fight so estimable a son of the people. By the bye, his father was all right, but the son is indifferent to that fact,

regards every newborn babe as potentially 'gentle.' He may be right; I decline to take sides in a controversy so wide. Patience. Gwen, if you employ a diplomat you must let him talk. If not, he sulks. Supposing that you will both second my efforts in the manner I desire, I am confident I can detach Ursie, without more than a few regrets and some wounds to pride. Poor child — she merits the latter, and, as a saint taught, nothing can work us damage but ourselves, the harm we sustain springs from us."

"Be enlightenin', if you can."

The young man came to sit by the table too, and fixed his gray, calm eyes upon the unbraidier.

"Bob is entirely at this sterling city clerk's mercy; incidentally, so are we; also the said clerk is a journalist. We have confided in him, forced by circumstances; we must not have to deny truths in print. Additional arguments were not needed for persuading us that Ursula cannot be bullied, yet it is well for our motives to be collectively studied. Believe me, I should be sorry to insult Hunter."

The father was roused at last to press for explanation.

"You propose then . . . ?"

"That we meet him, and her, with sad resignation. Undue meekness creates obligations in others. It will in Hunter, if I am not mistaken in his blend, it

must in Ursie, because she loves us. Her pride is larger than she knows, that is why generosity of her own, in accepting the clerk, fills her with ardour, that too is why opposition would bind her to him irretrievably; when she feels she has humbled us, wrung reluctant concessions from us, she will begin to be sorry for herself. And in the course of a few months, at the longest, I shall have shown her Hunter in a different light."

"How?"

"My dear father, is there any man who can be shown to his girl as he has always been?"

"There's some ground for Vin's hopefulness; Ursie couldn't overlook much."

"The common man is commonest in his love intrigues," said the philosopher, as though communing with himself. "That which is vicious in the aristocrat becomes nasty in the pleb'. Nastiness has more bitter enemies than has great crime. It is even probable that a well-born young woman would find it more painful to pardon her fiancé for simply kissing a lass who sold winkles, than for running off with a peer's wife. The moral is — we are all snobs."

"Certainly I've always been glad Bob doesn't omit making use of a mouth wash when he's drunk too much."

"Exactly. We . . ."

"Oh, shut up, Vin."

The Squire swung his chair round and contemplated the carved mantelpiece.

Vincent amended his speech, but was not to be baulked of it.

"We do require that our intimate's vices should be expensive. Leave Hunter to me. Look broke down by humiliation, sir, but refrain from upbraiding Ursie."

"She'll get plenty of violent scolding from Madame. How unfortunate the bull-dog was out to-day."

"Nothing is to be actually regretted, for everything is item in the maturing of the individual. From our standpoint, in this little matter of speck Ursula's orbit in space, maybe the Hunter episode will incline her path toward Billie's. Meanwhile my plan relieves us of the peril of making fools of ourselves and prevents friction. Be absolutely too broken to speak, sir, let me voice you."

It was fifty minutes before the bicycle must be mounted when Joel brought Ursula in by the west entrance, and took her straight to the piano stool at the far corner of the sanctum.

"I want you to play, not think. When you sit

waiting for me in our home it shall always be with a smile on your lips, not just patiently, in anxiety, as you'd do it here, this evening."

"You'll tell me exactly what has happened, repeat all the important speeches, when you come back?"

"Explain if the sunset is brilliant? Of course."

"That's glorious. What a day it has been!"

"Colossal."

They had ascertained from a servant that Mr. Nutton was in the library, so Joel went to meet his fate. Finding Vincent present was an unmitigated boon. Yes, the lover who had to announce that he had won a rich bride, otherwise would not have been able to marry, needed what solace there could be at the minute. The fact that these men had been good to him, that he appreciated them both, that he was not afraid of being snubbed, gave venom to his consciousness of his own unworthiness from their altitude of criticism. Vincent's handshake, and prompt speech, accompanied by a genial laugh, struck the keynote to the family's bearing towards the aspirant.

"My dear Hunter, 'pon my word I'm sorry for you."

The Squire had his back turned; it was an awkward second while Joel stood at his elbow waiting for recognition. Then the tremulous hand of agitated old age gave the orthodox greeting in silence.

The student of psychology was watching the lines die out of Joel's face that had expressed satirical humour at his own plight.

"The thing was quite unpremeditated. I came down to get used to doing without Ursula, after having discovered what she is to me."

The Squire had retired to the fern-filled fire-place, his back had no reply to the bold suitor who had uttered his one and only apology.

"Fact is, my father is a bit crushed, we must let him experience the blest healing of time.—Smoke, won't you? — No? — Ah, conversation must not be hindered. A blind wife is not every man's selection, let me warn you."

"Choice doesn't enter into this business; there's a superior force called destiny. You won't grudge her the — the woman's kingdom, though I'm of no account? I'll try to get on, so that the connection won't clash as badly."

"You aim at a junior partnership in the iron-mongery? We shouldn't counsel that. Better let Ursula keep you altogether. Now, now, I protest against your shying at the suggestion! A solid character must preserve its balance, and you can't suspect us — two intelligent men — of accusing you of mercenary motives. I trust we do not underrate you."

The Squire's back was disconcerting; Joel while looking in the eyes of the son wished he could argue with the principal.

"I counted on your understanding. Can you point to a more fitting job? I refuse to . . ."

"Stay, stay — let no aspersions be cast on honest trade.—'If thy Vessel be but small in the Ocean of this World, if Meanness of Possessions be thy allotment upon Earth, forget not those Virtues which the Great Disposer of all bids thee to entertain from the Quality and Condition; that is Submission, Humility, Content of Mind, and Industry.' Browne never knew the gall of Poverty's bearing-rein, however. . . . A job, old man? Yes, I must secure you one. It may have to be waited for, but a secretaryship to . . . (I'll be prudent) to a celebrated politician will fall vacant ere long. That would put a pleasant bit into your mouth. In the interval — I speak with my father's approval — we ask you to oblige us by . . . er . . . reticence."

From the throne-like carved wood chair to which he had been signed, Joel looked forth unflinchingly, ready to repay the Nutons by reasonableness for the blow by which he had bowed the elder's back.

"Ursula thought you would bar publicity for our compact. We are indifferent about that."

"There's nothing but Ursie's regard for us to pre-

vent your marrying by special licence at once — she has enough money, though she made over her elder daughter's portion to Gwendolen, and has spent much on charities."

"There *is* something else — my regard, too, my sense of my position."

"That is honorably said, Hunter," came from the Squire.

Vincent's glance at the old man's silver head, then at Joel, said, as plainly as by words,

"We must respect his prejudices."

Aloud he remarked cheerily,

"No rings, please, the betrothal to be announced solely in the bosoms of our families. You must let me have the pleasure of calling on your mother when in town shortly. Frankly, we wish to be sure your patience will stand the strain of leading the blind. Be here as much as you can. We've several semi-interesting house-parties in prospect before the wedding one. As for the length of time that must elapse before we are certain that being wife to you will spell Ursie's happiness, we shall not quarrel over that. I will consult her. You mustn't fly impulsively into one another's arms, and repent deliberately. My own idea is that twelve to eighteen months should afford a safe test. Sorry to remind you how meagre is our knowledge of you."

Old Mr. Nuton seemed about to turn round and object, but sank his head again.

"You've received the shock magnanimously . . . I don't desire to rush Ursula."

"Be kind enough to give us as much of your company as possible, and don't knock me down if I venture to say I'll post you on a season ticket. No thanks, old boy.— You needn't leave us yet?"

Joel said he wanted to relieve Ursula's anxiety while she walked with him to the lodge to the bicycle. Vincent playfully shook him, and pushed him towards the door.

"No solemn farewells. . . . Father will be in better vein for accepting a future son in law next time you come. . . . Hurry to the rash girl. I will drive you to the station, and a groom shall restore the other machine to-morrow. Can I do less for a brother?"

On the threshold Joel looked back uneasily at the bowed figure.

"I'd a load to say, that you've sent clean out of my head."

"Words, words — volatile, frothy words. Recall Racine's inimitable self-interrogation, '*Toutefois que sert il de me justifier?*' . . . I can allow you precisely twenty-five minutes for love's young dream."

Was a beggarly suitor ever shown greater kindness?

CHAPTER XXI

BREAKING IT TO MOTHER

SUCH trivial things affect smart life; Joel could have stayed till a later train if he had brought those evening clothes, but to share the stately dinner at Norbys, attired incorrectly, was a crime of which he would not be guilty. So it was not much after nine o'clock when he was with his mother again, in the parlour, where she sat before the treadle sewing machine. The subdued elation in his manner was not lost upon her. Springing up she came to his side in the window, mechanically pulling over the curtains more as shield from the Jinkses, and drew his right hand round her still girlish looking waist. She was all fluttersome.

“Did they make a nice fuss of you, and *weren't* they glad to have got you back again?”

“I met with extraordinary kindness,” said Joel, fervently. “Mother — you’ve often told me of the Society, their (or should I say its?) way of trying to talk young folk out of intended marriages that aren’t to bring little Quakers into the world. You practically made one of me, but not with my father’s

leave, I know. I conclude you just had to have him, dear? There could never have been any other husband for you?"

"I fought them all, Joel — the women Friends, and the men, especially, who were appointed to get information as to his disposition towards us. He wouldn't sign anything, forbade me to describe him as an approver of the Society, and hadn't ever set foot within one of our meeting houses. So there wasn't anything for me to do but stand out. Yes, I do believe God meant us to marry — else, how could it have happened? You're so clever, yet even you can't explain why the Almighty wills everything that occurs, and yet some of its wickedness."

"You've got hold of it wrong, but never mind. I don't agree that He requires all persons to be members of the Religious Society of Friends — (see, I won't say Quakers, since you look reproachful when I do) and I imagine our villainies He turns into good. But you haven't answered the main point, darling — didn't you know it must be my father, or no other?"

"Of course, Joel; to have ever doubted that would have shamed me. How some women *can* marry twice passes my comprehension; it really isn't quite respectable of them, in my opinion, only it wouldn't do for us all to think alike. One man out of all the millions, that's my ideal."

"Supposing he had been deaf, dumb and blind?"

Patience Hunter bridled, a pretty pink flush came on her thin cheeks.

"I'd have loved him all the more. What do you take your mother for, one of these fashion-plate creatures, all clothes, though not dressed decently, but no heart?"

"Then you mustn't mind having a blind daughter given you some day, little ma. Ursula sent you her love, in advance. I didn't mean to win her. . . . I dared not hope for that . . . but it all came out in the second of meeting. . . . Don't cry, you little goose, I'm as madly happy as any sane chap can be."

The arms that had nursed him, and held him back from dangers of the toddling time, went round his broad chest now, as though to snatch him from threatened ill; a glance into his face changed the hold into a squeeze of congratulation.

"My boy, my Bear, I'll lead her about for you!"

"So you shall."

"But the babies, Joel, mightn't they be born blind too?"

"Nonsense," he cried brusquely, with a laugh. "Ursie wasn't sightless as a kiddie, there's no hereditary evil. You'll have to comfort her, so shall I, perhaps, for not being able to see the bairns, but that's the worst to fear. Don't look so far ahead; the Nu-

tons have behaved nobly, still, they want us to wait, only secretly engaged, twelve months or so."

Mother's gaze had travelled over the road now, triumph was written in it; she shook her fist once, silently, at the head of a Jinks girl thrust out of a window. . . . *If they could but know!*

"The poor dear afflicted young lady . . ."

"Don't — call her Ursula."

"We had better be honest, love; it's a great match for you, and you say she has a fortune all her own, that couldn't be taken from her. It's come about because you're a genius, and have such beautiful manners. Clara and I will keep right in the background, I'll see to that, always near, but not appearing in company . . . but, Joel, if she — Ursula, has given you all her innocent heart, you . . . you ought to tell your Maker you acknowledge you are not worthy."

"No mortal could be."

That record evening for rejoicings in No. 10 put even Dorothy into radiant good humour, for she had cake and elderberry wine after supper for some cause not explained; Clara, alternating between telling Joe he was a designing scamp, and declaring that marriage was degradation for any woman, managed to convey at the same time her uproarious delight in his having asserted himself among the class the Nutons

stood for. Again and again mother half wept, at the standing so much second with her boy, again and again she nodded at him, with her sunniest smile, and the assurance, "I'm *not* jealous." When his sister caught him alone, on the landing, she chuckled.

"You fickle wretch! *aren't* men vile brutes? But I'll be awful sweet to your catch, if only she doesn't put on superior airs."

Joel reserved the news about the secretaryship to a celebrated politician to relate when mother sat with him upstairs, and the gas was all out. It thrilled even him, but he was touched by her trembling ecstasy. "Oh, Bear, I shall be in the ladies' gallery some day and listen to your maiden speech. In politics mothers who don't speak quite correctly, or aren't smart, are a help rather than hindrances, especially to Radicals. God *is* good."

"Naturally you expect me to be Prime Minister?"

"Very likely indeed. This miserable little house, and the mean road, won't matter then."

"Eh, what? . . . I thought there wasn't such a charming villa, or nicelyavenued street in all Christendom?"

Patience Hunter could veer round in one instant, or less, when shown a case from two sides.

"Certainly not, for us, or for what we used to be, but you're almost one of a grand old English family

now, and I shall always be your mother. You've lived to make me proud. . . . And I don't deserve the wonderful joy any more than you do."

Ursula was not having as comfortable a sequel to her day of engagement. Father was oppressed by gloom, Vincent put the affair in the wrong, as much as he could, by teasing her for her youthful sentimentality. "Your beggar-man, Queen Cophetua," was his monotonous way of referring to Joel. "My fair sister-philanthropist, I pray you learn to hide your rapture before Bob comes down, even his overmastering devotion to Gwen might succumb to his indignation at having to be brother-in-law to iron-mongery. Child-Socialist, I positively forbid your telling anybody but Madame."

To sentences of this species the girl returned smiling answers, kept her soul serenely poised above all the minor trials of the situation, yet she minded, strongly. Pride that could choose her honest, unvarnished, earnest, blunt lover, could also ache for his indebtedness to her. If she had not been blind, therefore doomed to be a burden, she would have asked him to take her poor; not as proof of his character, but for the sparing of them both.

Gwen hugged her impetuously, and scolded her after.

"Bob mustn't hear a syllable of this melodrama,

my infant, it's *too* ignominious. Lovin' him in my mighty style I simply can't let you squash the unlucky chap. Yes, yes, I know he's one of us, or on the verge, but you don't want to throw a ghastly damper over us in these fetchin' last weeks of betrothal? . . . The Hunter and Bob chum up at present, I used to think Bob tipped him, but a weddin's been broken off for less. . . . You dear little fool, I'd be furious with you if you'd got your eyes, you can't see the outsider mark on him as we do, he's a voice to you, an' he happens to have a mellifluous baritone for speakin'. . . . Dare say he sings, at pub' sing-songs; I'll ask him. No, Ursie, we're givin' you all the rope you want — hang the blunder — give the chap a long drop, when you've found out he isn't fit."

"He is a man, not a puppet."

"So's a bargee, or a scavenger, but one doesn't let 'em hug one."

If Joel's best time was when mother had crept off to bed, already composing the long letter she would write "dear Ursula" on the morrow, Ursie's was certainly when she could lie in her cool sheets, by the window opening on to roses, and know that human nature is the great factor in the union of two lives, and polish, beyond refinement, really doesn't matter. The brusque man, with the fine chin, seemed to be her

own Joel as soon as the other Nutons left off talking him over; no abuse of him could chase him from her love or trust, but the ridicule and some tiny true criticisms had power to set up a frail barrier behind which he looked something of an alien. Gwen wanted her to ask him to be less obstinate in argument; Vincent opined that a son of the people never learnt the absurdity of getting excited about abstruse subjects. Father had scarcely eaten any dinner.

Her ideal man ought to be firm of opinion, not afraid to stand up for his principles; she knew Joel went to a public house for billiards, as relief from the weariness of home, and to rifle practice in the yard; if he sang there, why should he not? She was prepared to teach little items of etiquette; his innate courtesy would carry him through all social crises, his having no put-on manners was as pleasing as his use of only sanitary soap. Wasn't she dead tired of her circle, except for loving some individuals? Didn't she know that Gwen and Vin, even Father, would have been nobler beings without their environment? Hadn't she, long, long ago, desired to be not *of* the world, though born in it? Joel, with his quiet strong protectiveness, his unpretentiousness, and plain language, was her champion, come to rescue her from a crowd in which shams and idols were degrading, and from her own sad bewildering kingdom of darkness.

Alone with the night, that was more or less blind time for all women, with the peace of bodily rest, and the soothing scent of flowers, especially when nightingales sang, and she tried to recall again the touch of a masterful hand grasping her wrists, of a mouth reverently kissing her "lost eyes," Ursula gathered courage for the battle she must wage for Joel and for herself.

A champion must be antagonistic to the evil from which he rescues. He was completely her own.

Next day Madame returned, flew from one of her terrific rages into another, exhorted, warned, and denounced.

"The disgrace of it! . . . *You* to so want to marry that you snatch at this low offer. Is sex to swamp a girl's intellectual judgment? Can't you see what this fellow is after? Why should he choose you?"

"I know all you think, added to all you say, Dina. There are only two motives a man could take me from, avarice, or an extraordinarily great love. Joel isn't under any misapprehension, he consents to seem a fraud. He does his best, for me, and keeps his head up."

"Common brazening of the thing out. Does *anybody* approve?"

Ursula shook her head.

“ Would you, for another blind, rich woman? ”

“ Probably not.”

“ Yet you are content for yourself? ”

“ Perfectly, I trust him.”

CHAPTER XXII

THE ROLE OF DECEPTION

OH, the preparations for Vincent's call on Mrs. Hunter! It said much for the constitution of Joel's happiness that it was proof against the jarring shocks he received daily in his home. Household work was done at odd hours, from five o'clock of a morning onwards, again at night, in order that dresses might be changed by three of the afternoon, even Clara putting on her best, out of her determination to manifest sympathy in her brother's cute move. When he came down to breakfast he would be assailed by minute enquiries as to the times that smart folk might let themselves call in unimportant neighbourhoods, as to the way Vincent liked best to be talked to and have his tea made, questions that seldom varied. When he returned in the evening his mother's first words would be, "We've not had him, dear."

The muslin curtains were taken down though scarcely soiled, for nobody should justly accuse Patience Hunter of failing to keep up the honour of her boy's abode; the aspidistras were washed, chair-covers starched and reglazed, crumbs on the floor

were pounced on anxiously, books and music tidied away hourly, the carpet newly darned with worsted to match, window-cleaners patronised, wonderful cakes concocted. What agonies of apprehension mother went through all those afternoons, sitting doing plain sewing, with fancy-work ready to cover calico, stationed behind the parlour blind, with the laths turned so that the roadway was visible; how she regretted the "meanness" of the furniture — all but the old Sheraton bureau; the number of tears that welled up on account of Joel's having no better house, and such an inferior mother and sister, God alone knew. It was "all very well to be so simple and unconcerned," she told him dozens of times; that was "just like a man, but she knew young Mr. Nuton would notice everything that wasn't *comme il faut*."

The fever of preparation increased when Ursula wrote that Vin was staying a week in town. By then all the inches of the linoleum or boards of No. 10 had been scrubbed so often that Dorothy flatly refused "to so much as take a flannel to them again"; the few "brights" had received polishings foreign to their former experiences, it had become wrong to move a piece of fossil in the glass fronted cabinet, or to rumple a cushion. And then Vincent came quite unexpectedly one night, to catch Hunter at home, so found Mrs. Judd with a pail of dirty water on the

front step, and the hall slab littered with little grocery parcels just left from the cheap stores.

The parlour too was empty into which Patience Hunter ushered him, not with that occupied air a room has when the mistress is found doing embroidery all ready for callers. Certainly he did not seem to mind, his smile was most reassuring, his way of sinking into the basket chair suggested that now he was really comfortable at last, the bow he gave over handshaking almost declared that he was not displeased by the appearance of his future brother-in-law's mother. Joel was fetched down from his attic, Clara hurriedly warned to wash before leaving the kitchen where she was pasting press notices of meetings into scrapbooks, then the immaculately clothed visitor entertained them all. This was not quite what Mrs. Hunter had anticipated, some serious references to the tie between them would, she felt, have been more appropriate than chit-chat, some sign of anxiety on his part as to the "kind of people" they were might have enabled her to say some little appropriate sentences herself, and so put the relationship at once on a firm footing. But no — soon he and Joel were so deep in a disagreement on the Government's policy in Ireland that they both must have forgotten the link that was to bind them. Joel had his satirical smile on when he came down; she knew that

meant his private Radicalism was to the fore, making him resolved not to be humbled unnecessarily; when it died away his expression was just keen; it struck her as bewildering how men could become so engrossed in public affairs that didn't concern them as to disregard the important home questions. Vincent chaffed Joel once, about his being so far from Ursie, reminded him that no ardent lover should shirk railway journeys that might give him all week-ends with his girl, surmised that mothers and sisters were benevolently ready to be neglected in such cases.

"Indeed, yes," said Patience, "I wouldn't for an instant want to stand in dear Miss Nuton's way."

After the visitor had gone off in a motor that had kept all the Jinks heads thrust out, coming into the parlour to find Joel frowning involuntarily, she whispered, behind Clara's retreating back, "Yes, boy — *I know* it's hard."

"What is? . . . Oh, I guess, the crack in the chimney-glass, or the broken fender-bar. . . . Dearest little ma, don't fash yourself over trifles. There's no sham about us, no big 'uns any way, that's all that matters. And you gave him a grand welcome."

"But I did think he would ask if I was willing about the marriage, or at least try to gather how I take it. It's such a callous style of accepting the

connection, Joel, unless he felt all the while he was behaving magnanimously, as you'd call it."

"No doubt that was in his soul, madre. We aren't exactly a catch, as relatives, let's recognise our deficiencies. If you were in the Nutons' position, what then? Suppose I had wanted you to call on some people about nineteen grades lower socially than ourselves, because I was going to marry a daughter?"

Her lips trembled so that they had to be kissed better.

"Yes, Bear, I shouldn't have been willing at all, I'd have fought your desire for your own good, tried to shame you out of wanting a common wife. But we aren't vulgar, are we?"

"No; only Ursula herself, apart from her money or her rank, is . . . well, dearest . . . is stupendous. . . . Wait till she comes to see you."

"I don't feel as though I could do with any more ordeals for a little while."

"Trust your boy, he couldn't have lost his heart to a stuck-up young woman. You'll just fall on one another's necks, and be blissful. Nuton's a thoroughly good sort, no snob, but he avoids sentiment, must take all events frothily. That's his nature, more than his pose. I like him, I sort of feel he likes me, though he sincerely hopes Ursie and I shall tire

of being engaged. . . . Cheer up, the terrible happening is over, and we can go back to ordinary routine."

"If I had known he would talk politics, books, and the weather, I should have found time somehow to read the newspaper. Oh, my poor boy, I do hope he won't go back and give your Ursula a very poor account of . . . of all this."

Joel himself lived a life of strong contrasts, yet kept his balance of judgment. Love was steadying to his mind, he could make allowances for the persons whose interests were opposed to his, for Ursie's difficulties in her home circle, for mother's jealous anger because the Nutons only tolerated the bond, for Clara's violent attempt to applaud his cleverness without showing that she despised it and thought lovers fools. His hours alternated between ironmongery ledgers, the concoction of a plot for a novel about love and marriage, the coaxing of mother into peace, the maintenance of personal independence by the keeping of late hours, week ends at Norbys, smoking concerts at the Victory Inn, the cultivation of friendship with Patty. Unusually unvarying of character, he was the same man in the great drawing-room of the Priory, the woods with Ursula, the "office" helping Miss Dewey square her accounts,

the attic with bare paper sheets awaiting a masterpiece, or with mother occupying the armchair and expecting to be confided in.

"Joel, you shine," Ursula told him one Monday, as they said goodbye at such an abnormally early hour that none of the guests were stirring. She meant that he was too real a man to be flustered. Vincent observed the quality too, and murmured often, "Poor dear chap, it's great, but he'd never be made one of us."

The house-parties amused Joel vastly; some of the folk he looked on with awe, for their attainments, or gifts, but the majority were smart and nothing else, or brilliant but spoilt by smartness. Mrs. Langham made a species of dead set at him; he could not accuse her of flirting, nor of any serious pursuit, yet he knew he was singled out for her principal attentions, that she liked him extremely, and wanted to pierce the something of mystery around him. The Nutons' friends seemed all to have heard the tale of the burglary, and his share in guarding the wedding-gifts, but the Hon. Sydney Crone was known to be in Ransom Leadley's employment, detective work was regarded as not derogatory, a job, like bonnet shops, music-hall engagements, and dairy farming, to be permitted one's associates. Nobody snubbed Joel; he

was not prickly nor did he make advances ; somehow he wasn't of the set, but there appeared no reason why he shouldn't be.

The more hours he spent with his girl the more he settled down into devotion to her ; he preferred her when she was in cap and jersey, or a simple linen dress, but he was not struck dumb, or dubious, when she wore some of her mother's jewels upon a ball gown. She was his, anyhow : the boundaries of convention had so far been demolished, they were to go through life together, to be one. The crowd did not matter. That she was wealthy was lucky, since he was poor and burdened ; he was proud of the courage with which he was letting himself look mercenary ; that was his duty towards her, and he knew many men in his worldly condition would have made a fuss, or not exposed themselves to the odious suspicion.

Walks together were rare ; sometimes Vincent asked him not to try to monopolise Ursie upon expeditions, lest people gossiped ; and there was always a houseful at week-ends. Madame, who seldom spoke a word to him, thrust herself in whenever possible, parading her right to be the blind girl's companion. If he could be in her sanctum for half an hour or so, in Madame's absence, he called himself fortunate.

At the end of July the party of guests assembled for the wedding, and Joel was surprised to find him-

self wanted also. The extra holiday was easy to obtain — he took a week of the summer vacation.

Bob had all along been undesirably chummy, with a hankering after the friendship of the man who had struggled with him, who knew the ins and outs of the match. For hours Joel would be detained in the smoking room while Ebbingstone poured out grumbles about his cursed debts that obliged him to wed for money, his equally cursed ambition to get rid of his old record, and show himself "as bright and decent as any of the knelt-before mob." Joel gave him cutting answers, which served to stimulate more explanations, and moral counsel which Bob declared expressed his own views to the ticket.

"If Gwen weren't so infernally cold I'd have a better chance," he complained. "How's a man to adore home, spouse, and offspring, when he's treated like a footman without a character? Chaps who feel they've been took on trial always burst out — it's in the blood of 'em. I'm positively bent on being a credit — but there's somethin' cat-like about Gwen, she's always lurking to pounce."

Immediately after this conversation with the bridegroom Joel encountered the bride, in the solitude of a picture corridor. She gave the toss of her chin to which he was accustomed, but paused to speak familiarly.

"Pity, isn't it, that all the romance is in the wrong affair? We Nutons seem doomed to make a mess of matrimonial provisions. What's Bob been swearin' about now?"

"That you're too hard on him. Honestly, Miss Nuton, I give him the best lies I can."

"Why lies?"

"Prophecies that once you're his wife you'll grow fond of him, and identify yourself with all his interests."

"Floating him's just the sole object that'll occupy me."

"Can't you season the lessons and orders by a little human kindness? He is soft-hearted. Profligates don't get reformed by threats and cheques only."

Gwendolen gave her indolent smile.

"I want to laugh and scream at once whenever I look at him, or hear his voice — but don't agonise Ursie by lettin' her guess that."

It was Ursula herself who came towards them then, feeling her way along the corridor, smiling at the sound of their talking. Gwen departed laughing. Joel hurried to take up his task of guiding.

"I am so glad you are such friends; Gwendolen sings your praises to me, even though she doesn't want us to belong. They all like you, yet they won't

trust you. It's a queer old world. They think you are going to grow weary of being eyes for me, dear."

It was sweet to make fun in unison of the wild fancy; Joel spoke of his impatience to carry her off where he could watch over her every moment of leisure.

"Tell me," she pleaded, "you do think my Gwen is going to be a happy bride? Her voice has had tears in it lately — or I judge foolishly."

"She is brimming over with schemes for running Ebbingstone triumphantly."

"I know. But, Joel, does she *want* Bob always with her — as we want each other? I can't bear to doubt her perfect contentment . . ."

"You needn't. And Bob is going to do splendidly."

"How much does he love her?"

"He just raves about her."

Before the words were out Joel loathed himself, but was he not Ursie's defender? He was to cherish her, give her nothing but joy, help her in the trials that came; and the pity that she inspired, made passionate by his love, had not taught him yet that he could spare her best by the gift of inviolable faith.

He contrived to be next her in church for the wedding. The spell of the music, and the solemnity of the vows, were messages for those two, and Joel could have revelled wholly in the consciousness that she

moved nearer to him, that her hand just touched his arm, had he not had a sore conscience about those falsehoods lately uttered. The shame was added to when she said quietly, in the carriage on the way home, before Madame,

"Dear Gwen's voice didn't shake a bit, did it? But then, you say they trust each other so perfectly. And there can't be love without belief."

"Some day church ceremonies will be made obsolete, with judges' wigs, peers' robes, and lots of other foolery," snapped Dina. "Ordinary objects oughtn't to be pursued under cover of creeds. Ugh, how I hate humbug!"

"You must first persuade lovers that the objects *are* common," suggested Joel.

"Modern girls show improvement. Soon women won't be caught by hypocrisy."

The wedding-gifts were on show again, Smith was there, with a large staff of assistants, the Priory was so crowded that the whole of the grand rooms were insufficient for comfort, the babble of talk flowed on, the usual customs followed, and Gwendolen looked tragic. Her tones and speeches were most orthodox, she laughed a great deal, but Joel and Madame were at one for once in shuddering as they saw her eyes. There was a ball for the county at night, fireworks, endless frolics.

CHAPTER XXIII

A VEILED ACCUSATION

ALL the guests were to leave the day after the wedding. Joel rose as early as usual, to make the most of his last hours with the country. It suited him so well, this untroubled, daily existence, the beauty of the landscape and gardens, the being waited on, the ease that left the body free to recuperate after work, the leisure in which thoughts were plentiful — thoughts of value, he hoped. Luxury had no appeal for him in the coarser ways, he did not wish to be surfeited with wines, foods, and cigars, nor to make any sort of display, but the machinery of the Norbys household gave him a sense of being unchained. His plot was becoming a tangible thing, and his love for Ursula grew each hour.

After taking part in the first breakfast, at eight o'clock, amused by the yawns and complaints of some young officers who had to get back to Aldershot, and the rebukes hurled at them by a bishop who never varied his rising moment, Joel sorted Ursula's letters from the collection just delivered, and took them to her sanctum. Already he had his regular duties

in the house, and felt a member of it. Generally Madame de Vert came downstairs with his girl, so if Stephen had written his communication had to be kept in a coat pocket till a favourable opportunity for presentation. This morning, as Madame failed in her watchfulness, overslept, there was an hour's tête-à-tête in the room to which guests did not penetrate.

Ursie had a deep blue linen gown on, the colour that put warmer browns into her hair; the turned down white muslin collar gave her a Puritanish air of meekness, as she sat by his side at the desk, ready to sign notes he had penned, or typed, for her. It was that look of patience, the mark of the resigned blind, that always wrung his heart, and made him more inclined than ever to share the family conspiracy for sparing, and deceiving, her. Of course, she had talked of Gwen; equally of course he had comforted her. There was a letter from Stephen de Vert, but a satisfactory one, vowing that he was remembering all he had promised by word when she had come to Cambridge, that gambling had ceased to fascinate him, and he was keen on the Settlement scheme, seeing "that best of chaps, Drury," every day.

Work done, Ursula asked for news of the plot, and had it described.

"How long will it take to write?" she enquired next, laying her hand on Joel's by the blotting pad.

Leaning sideways, he studied her beautiful face — yes, it *was* beautiful, all that could be seen.

“The last occupied me eighteen months, after it was planned out; I have reckoned that this must have two years, and by then I’ll be in a better position to do the finish.”

“You mean . . . ?”

“*Book IV. The Lovers Married.* We sort of owe your people the eighteen months’ test, if they won’t be satisfied with twelve, but when those are up we can please ourselves.”

She nodded.

“I do love your pluck, Joel. Just of late days you’ve felt the hardships more — haven’t you?”

“Yes, dear witch. But I’m by nature a fighter. The foe might be a nicer one, I admit; no mortal is vain of being made to seem a sneak, but, after all, I believe it’s harder for you to be accused of having given your trust to a fortune-hunter.”

“No — I am fighting for you — that’s the solace; you are defending yourself. I am vain — of the blind discrimination that tells me you are wholly true. It has to be wholly. Any limitation would poison the faith, as when one counteracting drug is lessened in some dangerous prescription.”

Joel looked down, not at her face, and fell to stroking the long white fingers on his brown left hand.

"My Princess, I live to help you. It's such a perfect task that I've been wondering if I'm a brute because I'm secretly thankful you can't get your sight half miraculously back, after the fashion of novel heroines."

"Scrupulous soul! . . . If you could restore it you would eagerly, this minute."

"Rather. Nevertheless, lots of my favourite visions are of the ways in which I shall care for you almost as though you were a baby. There's a sanctuary kind of feeling about being eyes for you. A big piece of personal delight would have gone if I lost it. So don't fret — not as much. Say to yourself at bad times, 'My loss is his gain.' I want to roar with laughter now and then when Vincent kindly warns me how burdensome I shall find you. It's his least intelligent way of trying to detach me."

Later, when young Nuton amiably drove him to the station, neglecting some quite important personages for the purpose, Joel learnt that the attempts at getting rid of him altogether were being pursued in town too.

"You've a stalwart species of character in the city, Hunter," said the scholastic accents. "I have failed to light upon any flaw in you as individual, or servant, there."

"So you have tried?"

"Why yes, old man. There is no desire more natural than that of knowledge. We attempt all means that may bring us unto it. . . . Truth is of so great consequence that we ought not disdain any induction that may bring us unto it, especially when, impartially, one acts on behalf of a sister's happiness."

"Hang your definitions," cried Joel, with a laugh. "It isn't because you suspect me of villainy that you hope to send me out of Ursula's world."

"Admirably argued — or should I say, declaimed? No — you aren't mouldable, your impulses are dead against that fetich of family we spend our lives in worshipping. Upon my word, I don't boast that we are right, that your democratic views are not purer virtue, more to the land's interest; but our established custom nerves me to constant endeavours to bring about the dissolution of your hopes. Sorry — I congratulate you on having such a reputation among city men. I've made a long speech, entirely out of friendship."

Swinging himself out of the car at the station Joel said good-bye, then lingered to ask, after the porters had gone,

"Ursula is coming to see my mother soon. Will you try to stop that?"

"By no means. It is due to Mrs. Hunter.

Kindly convey my kindest regards. You will be eyes for Ursie, of course, as she terms it. Ah, you will need eloquence to sketch British motherhood in that fair guise. Don't look suspicious — I am her loyal admirer. Good luck to you. Come back to us next Saturday."

Joel carried with him the old opinion that Vincent liked him, but no sentiment of the kind would be let to interfere with the credit of the Nutons. And he had reluctantly come to see that Vincent thought Ursula's fortune was his chief aim. No Nuton could be so vulgar as to accuse another man, not proved the worst, of pursuing a blind girl for her money, but the philosopher had grown used to tracing greed in his contemporaries, the author to unravelling its thread through history.

At Norbys that evening there was a hush that seemed sad, and as much disorder as could interfere with the mechanism of so smooth a household. All day long luggage had been going away, guests taking leave, servants busied in stripping down dead floral decorations, Vincent in superintending the packing of the wedding-presents, some for Gwen's new home, some for storing. Now rooms upstairs stood open, the smoking pavilion on the lawn had no lights, the billiard balls were silent, gardeners still tramped in and out the hall, carrying pot plants;

there seemed no reason for doing anything amusing, even if the family had felt in the mood to be amused. The Squire and Vincent met each other's eyes guiltily, both thinking that there was no longer any escape for poor Gwen, though neither would have prevented the sacrifice if it had been still in jeopardy; Ursula wanted to cry, but fought the temptation, and went to Dina for relief from loneliness. Madame caught her in both arms, and gave her a bear-like squeeze.

"Poor chick — you'll miss her, but we have loads of work to do; to-morrow we must revise those estimates for Stephen. If you're jealous of Bob you should be able to understand my aversion to your rough man. Haven't I shared with you for years, only to be pushed aside by a stranger? If it were a fine stranger I'd be willing, but fine men don't . . ."

"Marry blind women? Oh, they might — it would make them finer."

Madame gave a tempestuous sigh.

"Look at it as your nearest do. Don't shut your mental eyes to the sanity of our contention. Why should *you* be so abnormally loved? Aren't there enough girls alive, with all their senses, for a man to choose wife from among? What can you know of a mortal you hadn't met last Christmas?"

"Quite true, dear Dina; but it isn't what I know, but what I trust. We can't know much of God, but

we love Him by faith. I think He meant our human love to be an imitation of that one."

"Haven't you ever been frightened lest we are right, and your judgment of this Hunter wrong?"

Ursula hesitated just a second.

"No, my blue devils have never gone as far as that. We are tempted against all faiths, because they are evidences of things unseen. But we are honest as we reject doubts. Try to like Joel for my sake."

"I shouldn't think of it. I'm here to guard you. It's not my way to talk pathos, but you must know what you are to me — the dearest next to Stephen. And I always share him you."

"You should share Joel."

"Instead of that, if you do marry him, poor silly girl, I shall have to stand by and see you disillusioned, or snatch you away from him, back to the safe friendships, the busy life of usefulness, that you abandoned. My blood boils when I look forward to that!"

Ursula kissed away a tear of which Armandine was fiercely ashamed. "We needn't decide yet; there are months to pass before I shall belong most to Joel. Then I shall love you, and Steve more, not less, with a nourished, not a starved, heart. That's too sentimental for you to approve, isn't it? Shall we go a walk to meet the postman?"

Being ready first Ursula leant against the stone coping of the verandah balustrade, at the west entrance, and Vincent came swiftly over the lawn to her.

"Smith is sent off at length, thank mercy," he laughed. "Effusive in his gratitude, fulsome in his praise of the manner in which we treat people. Going out? That's wise. I shall plunge into an article on the court customs of Joan of Arc's time, my method of blowing cobwebs away. By-the-bye, Ursa, I hear you are about to have a day in town?"

"Yes, at Joel's home. I am longing to know his mother."

Vincent gave his little polite bow, though there was no spectator.

"A charming archaic lady. Pretty still, tremulous, worn with mean frets refreshed by sincere religion. It is, no doubt, from her Hunter gets his excellent simplicity."

"And his sister?"

"We will call her a rough diamond, giving her credit for middle-class staunchness, good-nature, and agonising frankness. A Frenchman said . . . But madame is coming . . . You would not cling to Hunter against all reason, would you, dear?"

"Explain, Vin. You have something more in your mind."

"I have been investigating his record in the city, and find it wholly satisfactory."

"Of course."

"I am studying his private record now, or rather searching for the facts that a man doesn't want recorded. What if they turn out less clean? There is a shadow there, my child, a decided smudge, if I'm not mistaken."

"You hint at immorality of some kind?"

Vincent gently waved Madame back.

"You would, perhaps, easily forgive an entanglement?"

"There are none. Joel is spotless. He hasn't told me so like that — naturally not — but he has given me to understand that there hasn't been any woman in his life, neither for years, days, nor hours."

"You haven't known him long, Ursie, you can't watch his face; could you take his bare denial against proof that any one else would accept?"

"Yes."

"Nothing but his own apology would prove the case? And then you would take second place, have your predecessor pensioned off?"

Ursula shook her head.

"It wouldn't be the past sin that would matter; I know my world, I am a sinner myself, in a girl's ways; I would forgive as I hope to be forgiven —

but he would have deceived me — that would kill trust."

Vin looked thoughtfully at his shoes, a semi-smile on his lips as he saw himself confronted by as delicate a piece of finesse and diplomacy as ever king or courier, archbishop, or court favourite, manœuvred.

"And trust is essential? Passion would not override prudence?"

Ursula gave one of the spirited answers, the impetuous gestures that had been habitual to her earlier girlhood, before the crushing blindness had quieted her.

"Isn't confidence always the one inducement for a woman, that makes passion not only tolerable, but enchanting? Oh, perhaps not, Vin, but I think it would have been for me. But now, I could only marry a man whose face I shouldn't need to watch."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RAPID LIE

MADAME accompanied Ursula to Liverpool Street and consigned her to "the rough man's" escort, after having received from her an assurance that no run-away match was being schemed. She had furthermore told the Nutons that this was placing wicked reliance on Hunter, seeing that the girl was blind, and could not know where he took her. To this remonstrance Vin had replied by a gentle pat on her shoulder, and the words,

"Zeal, dear Madame, is the more honouring as it embodies common-sense. We have to depend on our readings of each other; I would as soon pass my job of defending Ursie over to Hunter as to the angel Gabriel."

The fact was behind this that when Ursie did put her foot down, in opposition to her relatives' views for her, they had to give in. When Father had told her Madame would keep with her all day in London, she had said, simply, "No." When he had amended the statement to, "Then a car and Jean shall be sent up to set you down in Mrs. Hunter's care," she had announced, "I insist on being handed

over to Joel at the terminus. He is to take me by train, just the journey he makes twice a day himself."

So the novel joy of having Ursula all to himself in crowded places, of protecting her from danger, of witnessing the pity with which strangers looked upon her, doubled at least Joel's anxiety to possess these privileges always. The compassion was kindly, would not have hurt her had she seen it; it gave his pride solace. Nobody knew, he never owned to himself, how much comfort that needed.

"Now I feel that you belong to me," he said, while they waited for their train.

"Now I know what it is to lean on you utterly. At Abbeyvalley I am so much at home that I don't feel lost. Here I should be quite stranded without your arm."

Once in the carriage she whispered,

"We're alone?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Joel, it's first-class!"

"Of course."

"It mustn't be on the way back. I want to sample your experiences; you told me of the crush, the standings-up, the clatter of the tongues, even the smells. I must try for myself."

"But why? If I had to bring you down to all

my straits I couldn't count on claiming you in eighteen months — less now."

"There are always two sides to a question; if I couldn't do a little to make myself less burdensome I shouldn't dare come to you. It's my loss. Haven't you ever fancied how I should exult in giving up money and all the comforts, flower-niches included, for your sake?"

What could Joel say? He had already guessed why women who love can call mean streets and vulgar villas beautiful. Ursula helped him to appreciate his mother.

The walk up the hill, after the greasy crossing, introduced poesy into Ellen Road. From afar he saw the curtains of the parlour quivering as Mrs. Hunter peered out, the Jinks girls stared boldly in a row, Mrs. Judd, emerging from the dustman's passage, stood open-mouthed, and then the gate whined under his touch; the two steps safely passed he pushed Ursie into the four-foot hall, the door shut up tight behind them, and, as he had prophesied, the two women dear to him were in each other's clasp. Patience had prepared nice little decorous sentences of wisdom, but all she cried was,

"Oh, you poor dear love!"

And that gave the blind girl full assurance that she was welcome, not only for to-day.

"Thank you, mother, I was horribly afraid my shade might frighten you. Now I know it hasn't."

The contrast between Ursula's delicate features, graceful movements, and soft voice, and Clara's stump, plainness, and violent tones, sent a shudder of anxiety through the brother, but he need not have quailed.

"Hullo? Come to try beastly cheap suburban-dom?"

"I expect it's cosy; you can all feel so near together," laughed the visitor. "You must have minded exchanging the country for it, but your home is a precious shrine to me, and I want a nook in it, please."

"Because of him?" asked Clara, with a gurgle of merriment. "Gracious, he won't be bearable soon if you go on like that. He's a decent sort of pal, I will admit."

"May I call you Ursula?" came Mrs. Hunter's timid question next.

"Till you like to make it Ursie."

"Secing you two, side by side, brings back such memories. Joel is just his father's height, but broader, and so self-willed-looking, though you can lead him about in one way, I'm sure, just as he leads you in another. My dear, we're just homely, and try to keep ourselves a little above the neigh-

bours — not that they mayn't be better spiritually, far be it from me to judge, but their ways aren't our ways, especially not as to boldness and noises, to say nothing of . . . Ah, you must be tired after your journey. A glass of home-made lemonade now? Fetch my little cakes, Clara."

"There is the ticking clock, and the canary is singing in the kitchen; this is the pink tapestry chair," said Ursula, later, while sipping lemonade. "Joel, how silent you are. I do all the chattering, and I must be tiring mother with my questions."

"Never," cried the elder woman, bestowing another kiss, since Clara, who would have made fun, was out of the parlour.

"My boy is not quite able to say much, not that's ordinary. He is looking at you in his home — such a shabby little place (yes, I own it is), but no doubt you seem more real to him among mostly bamboo furniture than in all your grandeur. It's like that with men, they delight in dreams, but want nothing so much as realities. I ought to understand him fairly well after all the years when he was a terrible pickle — worse than Clara, though she is so . . . so firm now. What a lovely shady hat, dear — you won't mind mother's saying so."

Joel came over the darned carpet, and laid his fin-

ger tips on the white wrist a second as he took away the empty glass.

"Marlborough does look fine to-day."

"Oh, boy, you forbade our ever calling it anything but No. 10."

"A very important spot in the map of the kingdom of love and faith," said Ursie.

Patience was thoroughly happy when she had got the visitor upstairs in her own bedroom, could find the hatpin heads, undo the veil, pass a comb most daintily through the waves of hair, talking all the time. Ursula submitted to the ministrations willingly, knowing she gave pleasure by being dependent, then drew her helper into the huge chair beside her, and began feeling her.

"Your portrait has been painted for me by that clever artist, Joel Hunter, but I must verify his accuracy. How good you are to me. And how difficult it must have been at first to let him love anybody else."

"No, dearest, no, I was thankful, after the shock passed off. A young man needs to be really bound up in a beautiful love, there are such temptations, such crafty creatures, a gray life isn't safe. We aren't made like that, thank God, or at least, not many of us, people say some are, though I've never

been sure myself. You can hear how Joel cares for you in every breath he draws, at any rate I can, but mothers do notice so. He doesn't seem to have known what was the matter with him before that day he went flying down to you, no, the evening before, it may have been, he certainly hadn't any genuine hopes then, still he was struggling towards getting his own way, just as he used as a baby. And you said yes, God bless you! He will surely make a good husband; he has been such a dear son."

Ursie had heard the note that jangled, the tiny minor cadence, the check to it that made discord in pure music.

"Tell me how I am to behave to him, to keep him happiest, mother?"

What a glorious appeal to answer! Patience Hunter screwed up her lips in the blissful perplexity of choosing among all the suggestions she could have offered. The recollection of those wretched hours of misunderstanding, when he had gone to business un-kissed, and had not been allowed to say good-night properly, settled the order of precedence.

"Most of all, trust him, my darling; he is such a proud fellow, under a sort of humility. He doesn't think a quarter enough of his talents, but he gets just mad—not violent, oh no, but set—if one doubts his word. I think that is because false-

hood was his fault as a child, and Clara is always casting it up at him, reminding him how his father beat him for it."

"Joel untruthful?"

"Yes, he was a lazy little chap who often played truant with others, and rather than get a playmate into trouble he would lie. He hasn't grown up with the habit, oh, dear no; I can't recollect his saying anything deceitful of late years, except once when he said he had been kept at the office, when actually he had seen young Rivers safely to his lodgings, to keep him out of any policeman's hands. Of course Joel didn't want us to know his friend had been intoxicated, but Ned is very simple, so told me how considerate he thought it of my boy to go as far at such an hour. Well, as I was saying, trust him implicitly, and that will finish making a good man of him."

"I see, it is putting him on his honour."

Mrs. Hunter held the girl closer still, around the waist.

"That is so, you are growing in wisdom, I expect, Ursie, because you are in love. There's nothing so beautiful for a woman. We have all been on our 'slippery paths,' dear heart, wanderers from the Fold, but we learn from that to have sympathy for the infirmities of others, as my favourite book says.

When you are my daughter really I can lend it to you. I did not mean that Joel is too proud to be silent under admonition when he feels he *has* sinned; only that you mustn't ever accuse him in mistake of much smaller. . . . No, that wasn't quite it, just remember that you are his real choice, the woman who, under God, is to guide him safely home. Men do need leading, dear. If I have blundered with him at times it has been because I was afraid to speak plainly, and have doubted him when he was innocent."

Ursula caressed the pricked sewing finger that was against her heart.

"Yes, I understand."

"Joel is always a gentleman," went on Patience Hunter, dimpling with pleasure in the phrase. "Though I am not well born he takes after his father. No, don't say I am anything more than a good mother, when I don't rub him up the wrong way, poor boy! Even then he was only silent and sore. We rely on God's putting our sins quite aside for us when we are sorry, so of course it is a dreadful injury to find another creature doubts us still. . . . You'd be surprised, too, how living in Ellen Road is inclined to let one down; high ideals are somehow eccentric, and flashy things get tolerable. But it's because Joel's what he is that directly he set eyes on you, you beautiful, soft-voiced, elegant, tender girl, he

. . . well, he wanted you. I've often longed for there to be ladies for him to meet."

Ursula stretched out her hands suddenly, with the action of a rejector of ill. Blindness of body oppressed her most when words gave her some ugly picture. But she would not let herself fear.

"Mother, I think Joel's wife will be enviable because he is like you. You're both so . . . so steadfast, you are yourselves, and in any land, or scene you wouldn't act, or be influenced. So don't ask me to believe that Ellen Road has made any difference."

"Are we? Now I didn't recognise all that. But I do say to him sometimes, 'I won't give in, I've my principles, I'm not a Mrs. Munro.' You do not admire that mother in his book, do you, love? Such a weak character, spoiling Jim, who was almost a cad. We must have some lovely talks about Joel some day, when you come to stay in London, and can steal off to Primrose Hill, nobody knowing why. It was kind of your brother to call. My temper gets up now and then when I reflect that Joel isn't thought fit to marry you, but now I've come close to you I shall not be as annoyed; you must be so precious. That's more to do with it, I hope, than your sister having married a peer, or your family being so ancient. . . . Come downstairs, we'll find Joel, and I must see that the dinner is all right. Our little

servant can't be trusted to handle anything on account of her black thumbs, and though Clara thinks herself a dabster, as boys say, at dishing up, I'd rather preside. You look perfect, Ursie, I didn't smooth out any of the nice crimpness of the waves. Bless you, I shall often cry that you can't see my Joel."

Ursula had a richer smile than Mrs. Hunter had yet seen, as she stood erect, waiting to be led.

"There are eyes of the soul," she said. "When darkness is blackest love keeps faith, and faith sees. You mustn't worry over my trouble since Joel will lend me his sight. You know I am as sure that things are as he says, as if I saw them for myself."

Nothing marred the peace of that day; the meat was cooked to a turn, the vegetables could not have been improved on by any chef, the custard came up smooth, without a crack, the compote of fruits might have graced a royal table. And how talk flowed on. Clara was amusing over anecdotes of some amateur theatricals for a creche, Joel was in his blithest vein.

Ursula was "shown the house," as though she had eyes. It was when she was in the author's attic, seated by his desk, trying his pen, signing her name on the blotting-pad, laughing at the blotty scrawl she was certain she was making, that a shadow came; then it was for Joel, not for her. From his position,

leaning over her chair, he could see down the street, and Patty Dewey was slowly ambling along in the sunshine, looking very conscious, as was her wont when passing No. 10.

The sight was not unusual; this was the time of evening at which the landlady of the Victory Inn often took an airing, and her promenading place was Primrose Hill. But the connection, of Ursula within, and this honest but common girl without, shamed the man who had made love to both.

Patty's appearance went against her; she did not look respectable, her clothes were too elaborate, the pink ostrich feathers in the gray hat were not suited to a lonely stroll in that neighbourhood, her white kid gloves had thick gold bangles over the wrists, her sunshade was poppy red, some braid was coming off her skirt, an accident that might happen to the best of women, but made this one seem of the lowest caste. Joel scarcely heeded what Ursie was saying. His grim eyes watched Miss Dewey's progress, he was realising what a vast difference there is between lust and love. Then he became aware that his own girl had risen, was pointing to the mantelshelf, and asking some question.

"I didn't hear, I was buried somewhere under a conviction that I don't deserve you. . . . But how could I?"

"Nonsense, as Madame warns me, I'm not every man's choice. My portrait lives over there, as you told me?"

"Always."

"Where you took off your cap to it that time you . . ."

"Yes. Where I say good-morning, and good-night."

Patty was almost out of the road, her profile showed as she turned the corner. How inexplicably crazy he had been. What a vile pursuit had disgraced two years!

"And it is quite true, as you said to me, that you've never loved, or wanted, any other woman?"

"No," half shouted Joel.

For an instant the familiar little room seemed to be spinning round, his pulses bounded fiercely, he could have kissed her feet in penitence, but yet another self within him was declaring that this was no lie. He could *not* have wanted Patty, it must have been all an error, some satanic delusion, a madness for which the victim was not responsible. He had only *thought* he loved and wanted.

"Children," called mother's voice, from the landing. "You must come down if you are to catch Ursie's train, and if you miss it she will never be allowed to come back to us."

Perhaps Joel would have spoken truth even then, contradicted himself no matter at what cost, if Ursula had not suddenly put both her arms around his neck, and her lips to his, graciously, sweetly, as a happy confiding child.

CHAPTER XXV

SHADOWED

"You naturally like that excellent, early Victorian woman, Mrs. Hunter, Ursie?"

"I love her."

"What an immense pity it is," went on the philosopher brother, "that admirable people must aspire after sets in which they wouldn't look comfortable. I regret, more than I can say, that you have exposed yourself to a heartache, dear, but your spirit is strong to bear, even if Madame's contention is not right that you will be relieved at getting rid."

The girl gave another of her rare dramatic gestures.

"Aren't we above objecting to a *mesalliance*? Oughtn't culture to have taken that mean little point of view from us, Vin?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Or strengthened it? Which?"

"Oh, when you begin to ask vague ethical questions, to doubt if white is really white after all, I give up argument. Those who disagree must have some common faiths to start from."

"We are a nation of devil's advocates; that is the result of the culture to which you appeal. But, my dearly beloved sister, are you ready to pledge fidelity to a man who is not the immaculate being you have believed him. Mind, I am not debating the wide subject of should a young woman expect that whiteness of conduct which, as you reminded me, may not be called white by all."

Ursula strolled to the door, smiling.

"Don't be silly, Vin. I am off to study coal club rules, to atone for my holiday yesterday. Joel may have been in tight places, who hasn't? — appearances have been against him, but I have no sort of woman rival, and that is something of which any girl can be proud. He told me so again last evening. I too am shirking the 'wide question.' I merely asked him because I wanted to be armed for fighting his battle with you, and the rest of his foes."

"She who puts an unfair conundrum has no right to demand a correct answer."

"Do you suggest that Joel is a liar?"

Ursula was at the door now, her beautiful, sightless face lifted, chin pointing ceilingwards as was its custom when she felt she had the last word in a discussion.

"Lives there the human being who has never lied?"

The chin dropped rather suddenly; Vincent had raked among hot ashes that had an unpleasant reek.

It was of his having deceived her that Joel was thinking while busied with Mr. Leadley's ledgers. The littleness of the matter involved did not solace him for the vileness of the fact; he had denied having pursued Patty, the falsehood could not have been increased if he had succeeded in the pursuit. There is the story of Adam and Eve and an apple, which is just as compromising if the apple was no ordinary fruit, but every bit as degrading if the temptation was as apparently small as the bite of disobedience. For we each possess conceptions of personal perfectness, and sin as we fall below their obligations. Ursie was blind, and to hoodwink a blind woman by one's voice is a deed of horror.

The more Joel went over and over the precious talk in the attic the less of a man he thought himself. His soul became a sort of playground for all the rough sports whereby the character muscles are strengthened, till he was sore and wearied. Kicked, bruised, baffled, and shaken, he scarcely knew what would bring victory, or how to triumph himself without maiming Ursula. If he confessed, as he actually wanted to do, he would hurt Ursie and make it difficult for her to rely on the sincerity of his eyes for her. But if he didn't confess, why then, the

wrong against her dear sovereignty would endure. He felt she would prefer to suffer a little than be deceived. So he resolved to spend the week-end at Norbys, for the purpose of baring the crime. Mother said she wasn't surprised that he couldn't keep away from the darling.

On Thursday evening he set off for the Victory Inn in a most chastened mood. Neglecting Patty was not the way to make up to Ursula, of that he was fully aware; being meekly nice to Miss Dewey, to whom he was bound by one of those fragile ties of honour that true men cherish, seemed to be acting as Ursie would wish. Every atom of fascination had died out of Miss Dewey for him; he thought that had he and she been sole survivors after the destruction of the inhabited world he would have gladly contemplated the extinction of the species. Sometimes when he was with her — as to-night — he was astounded by the difference that comes of loving a girl at a distance.

Patty was not spoilt in his eyes, by contrast, it was not that; he saw what a comely, kindly, actually desirable creature she was, and liked her artless artfulness, her tendency to pathos, her clear common-sense, just as he relished his mother's comical blend of weaknesses and beauties. He imagined that it was the writer of novels who saw Patty now, and made all

possible allowances for foibles, the picturesque, if regrettable, black patches on nature.

The talk in the club room had either lost in quality or he had become educated above it. He wanted to instruct the fellows on many intellectual details, but happily forbore, knowing that way priggishness lies; so they did not perceive any disagreeable superiority, and made him as cordially welcome among themselves as though he had not partly cut adrift. When the room cleared he stepped out into the cobblestone passage and leant over the window-sill of the "office."

Miss Dewey was seated at a table under the centre gasolier, her elbows on the green cloth, among account-books, her eyes shining with tears.

"Hullo — got into a maze of figures?" he asked.

"Yes, dear. I've been trying to settle on ways and means for the future; expenses multiply, and I'm not saving as I ought. Heavens, I can't keep on at this humdrum trade till I'm eighty, can I?"

Joel hesitated; the prospect did look awful to him, but then he had an idea that she doted on the Inn, with the position of authority that its management included, and, for the life of him, he couldn't imagine any other business in which she would shine. For reasons of his own he was not anxious to advise matrimony.

"No, certainly not," he rejoined heartily; "you must be able to retire in your prime and enjoy travel, or idleness, or anything that strikes you as jolly. Can I help with the sums?"

"Your folk will be angry if you are late home."

This was the sure method of obtaining his society for an hour at least. Joel left the window sill, entered by the door, and drew up a chair beside the perplexed landlady.

"Oh, you dear women, you all make calculations on scraps of paper that would go into your thimbles. Let's have the whole of the items down in large black and white, with margins, then we shall find out where we are."

Patty did not know for certain that Joel considered himself engaged to the "lord's sister," but he had not been willing to deny that he was when taxed with it; Mrs. Judd's crony char-lady, who worked at the Inn, had been describing to-day how a remarkable visitor had been prepared for at No. 10, Ellen Road, how she had turned out to have a shade over both eyes, so "must 'ave met with a h'accident," but was "fine set-up, and carried 'erself with a n'air." If any of the Norbys Priory grandees spent the day with Joel's family, why, there was evidently an engagement, secret if not tolerated, and where, then, did Patty's own hopes come in? She had not been

so sure that the lord's sister would prove impracticable, and the "old love" revive. There is always something to be revered in a love that is willing to be laid in a grave with a view of resurrection. Patty had gained a new dignity, although she had been crying. The minor sniff that escaped her now and then close to Joel's ear made him extra kind to her. All the particulars of her finances he had been through before, at income-tax times, her investments had been made mostly at his advice, so the task of arriving at a statement of her position was not complicated; next he got her to show him the receipt totals for several past years, that he might trace whether there was the decline she lamented, or only a temporary lull in profits. While he made his neat lines of figures he was telling himself:

"When Ursie sprang that question on me, as Patty was walking by the house, I had reached the conclusion that Patty wasn't anything to me, that suspecting I had either loved, or wanted her, was absurd."

The sums that the woman found appalling had no terrors for the man; his reflections went on as he reckoned up her affairs.

"I didn't mean to lie. But lie I did. A child craves little bits of shiny gilt stuff as much as pure gold, or before gold has ever been seen; that isn't any

insult to the real metal. Will Ursie understand?"

The results of several sums were now being added together, then Joel tested the accuracy of the discovery, till his brain was otherwise occupied. "There's not been any woman where she lives, in the depths of such soul as I've got — never one has come nearer than being wanted . . . Lord, I'm sorry enough for that. I'll tell the darling so. But will it content her?"

The total was being subtracted from; Patty had become so struck by the cleverness of the helper that her sniffs had ceased. He was settling, "I don't suppose any feminine creature could grasp what I mean. That is one of the vital differences. But she shall have all the humility she demands. I am a skunk. She's an angel."

Laying down the pen Joel began an exposition of the manner in which the working of the hotel had grown in cost, and declined in returns.

Miss Dewey heard him out, then, most inconsequently, told him,

"I can't make up my mind why you take all this trouble, so quietly, too, as though it was anything to you; and your ma and sister sure to be annoyed because you aren't home."

It was enough to exasperate a man who hated the slightest ghost of a scene, but he responded amiably:

"Friendship, my dear girl. Haven't you had a friend before?"

"Not a man; it wasn't likely; they were all lovers, of a sort. There's only two kinds of women who can have men chums, Joel, the ones who are born old maids, and the ones who have got extra strong intellects. I'm neither."

His laugh was spontaneous; he thought the definition cute, if too sweeping.

"Well, you've got a pal now, who sincerely wants to smooth away some of these tangles. The worst expenses are those. . . ."

"Hang the Inn?" cried the landlady. "Joel, do tell me a little. Are you going to marry some swell girl?"

"It's my supreme hope."

"You'll have to wait years? Or will you run away with her?"

"We love each other, but we aren't formally engaged; that is sufficient for the time being. No, certainly there won't be any bolting."

Patty was wiping her eyes. As he looked round at her she gave a watery smile, which touched him profoundly.

"Sorry, old girl. I apologise again — and I'm regretful that's all I *can* do. You're such a ripping good soul, you ought to find someone to be the

bliss of, while he runs this show for you. The style you've kept it going since your father died is little short of grand, but it is a job for a man."

"She'll look down on you — and you're that proud."

"No. She's not the trashy rich species. A woman can be as simple-sweet with a large fortune and an old name, as without them."

"Oh, Joel — she's rich too, then?"

He fidgeted among the documents, tying some in packets, ranging others in a row. That Patty forgave him more than she had yet managed, just for respect for Ursula's wealth, did not occur to him, but so it was. To a practical person an immense deal can be excused in a man in pursuit of money.

It was also an alleviation to vanity to know that she could not have competed with riches; the unknown "lord's sister" had gone up by leaps and bounds in her estimation.

"I can't get reconciled to the idea of your wasting all your best years waiting for what may never be, but, if you're really expecting to bring off a tremendous match, why. . . ."

A light, like a lantern flash on a picture, went over his face then, silencing her by the revelation of how mightily he did hope — and care. Her own loss seemed paler.

"I won't worry you, dear. Go on telling me about the liquor bills and the corn merchant."

"You brick.— Can't you get some more staying boarders?"

"Mrs. Lisle is bother and scant pay; she's fetched a child from somewhere, it calls her mother, and I guess she's kidnapped it from the husband who divorced her. That's another anxiety for me. A man came in on Monday night, took the best bedroom, doesn't mind what he pays for breakfast and supper, goes into the city all day—so he says—loafs about all over the place smoking when he *is* in—and Mrs. Driver, the laundress, swears that her sister's chap has seen him often coming from a detective agency in Oxford Street. If it's Mrs. Lisle he is watching who knows what scandal the Victory mayn't be dragged into. I'm sure I've always tried to keep its tone up, Joel, all but . . ."

"Me?"

"Folk talk—I warned you so long ago. I don't care a rap."

"Nor do I. Still, I'd better keep away. . . ."

She gripped his arm.

"If you do I'll . . . Oh, what *can* a poor girl do when suicide's wicked? . . . These talks—they're rare now, in all conscience—are all I've got to live for. Friendship they stand for, I agree, nothing

more, but you mustn't rob me of them too.— What's that noise in the garden? — Why, if that detective noodle isn't smoking in my arbour."

Without a thought but for the vexation of being spied on, Patty went hastily to the window and dragged down the blind.

"You had the cord off the reel then. Impertinence isn't in it, and I trust you've somebody left about to take care of you when I'm gone?"

"Old Ben is asleep in the pantry room under the stairs, I could call to him any time. Thanks for all the trouble you've taken, Joel; the corn-merchants must be rowed, and I'll advertise in the local paper. It doesn't matter about less profits, if I can keep going. Money wouldn't do much for me."

To have bolted then, with her breast heaving in a style that threatened a repetition of tears, which would mean perhaps the summoning Bella from her top-floor bedroom, and the administration of sal volatile, would have been brutal. With a patience learnt at home, and a tenderness caused by repentance, Joel chatted on a dozen topics of no consequence, while the storm indications subsided. Upon taking his leave at last, stepping softly out by the garden door, crossing the tiny sooty strip of grass, on his way to the gate in the wall, he was aware of being followed by the strange boarder. The fellow

emerged into the by-road too, walked the same route, a dozen yards behind. The fact that he stared hard, under the gas-lamp in front of No. 10, Ellen Road, while the latch-key was being fumbled for, took from Joel's sense of the comfort of established independence.

CHAPTER XXVI

ACCUSED

GOING to Norbys with a confession to make was a sober journey. Joel knew he would not shirk; he could rap out a prevarication or lie on impulse, but cowardice would not keep him silent when he had determined on truth. The previous time on which he had let Ursula understand he had not cared for any other girl, he had not been conscious of more than the statement of a fact in such a manner that it implied a falsehood also. Conscience had not pricked him much about that. It was love pricking him now. He wanted to be all she thought him, her absolutely trustworthy knight, and that involved making much of this lapse from sincerity. He felt that the humiliation would eventually draw him closer to that spiritual self of hers which so shone. It was a very serious resolved man who got out of the train at Abbeyvalley about five o'clock, and was driven, by a chauffeur, through the lanes and villages under an August sky of azure. Vincent usually met him.

Palley, the butler, informed him that Mr. Nuton would be glad to see him at once in the library.

Ursula was there, close by the door; as he entered

she rose and he kissed her once, in spite of the presence of those who said there was no engagement. Vincent, nodding from the window at the far end of the room, waited a few seconds till the father had been shaken hands with, then strolled up and put himself between Ursie and the lover. "This family conclave, old man, is going to be unpleasant," he said suavely. "We have to catechise you on private conduct. Would you rather my sister left us? She is ready to do so if you desire."

Joel wheeled round quickly, ran his glance over the three faces, let it rest on Ursula's, bit his lip, to hold in rapid speech, a precaution he always observed on occasions of crisis, and said, bluntly,

"No."

Steadying himself by a grip of the back of a chair, he recovered his pluck sufficiently to add, "I came prepared to answer — no, I mean, to explain things, to her. Not to others; there wasn't any need. But I had better hear what you want to know."

"I don't doubt you, dear," came the girl's voice.

He spoke to her as though no listeners were near.

"You haven't any occasion, Ursie — not in any important fashion. I've been a fool — a weak fool, in the past, perhaps, as to 'private conduct,' but that's all."

"Take care, Hunter — don't incriminate yourself."

Joel was riled, as well as penitent. He could deny the Nuton charge. The story that had to be confessed concerned one of those fine fanciful brocades of honour and love of which only women — the best — are judges.

From the first mention of "private conduct" he had leapt to the conclusion that the detective in the garden of the Victory Inn had been a servant of the Nutons.

"Can't we get to business?" he asked shortly, addressing the old man, who, as usual, was skulking behind the intellectual son, who could bring off any crisis with the least possible disturbance to surfaces.

The Squire was unwilling.

"You have laid us under an obligation, Hunter, and I trust we never repay benefits with ill; that is the most distressing aspect of the new phase in your relationship with us. Believe me, I hesitate to force any explanation from you, especially as there is no valid ground for our interference."

Vincent smiled broadly, then recollected himself.

"My father commissioned me to put the disagreeable problem before you. As you know, your reputation in the city is excellent, and you kindly appreciated my motives for enquiring there. Well, a

chance clue set me upon your tracks in Chalk Farm. As Ursie's protector I . . ."

"For the family's sake you wanted, by any method, to get rid of me."

"The interests are identical, old man. When I discovered things to your credit I congratulated you; I have no feeling against you; as Browne said, 'there is no man alone, because every man is a microcosm.' Now that things look as though you aren't to be congratulated on your moral virtues I give you the chance to clear yourself, before Ursula, since you want her present."

Joel flushed up painfully. It had struck him that the blind girl was too quiet to be happy, too patient to have the faith she had professed. And she looked saintlike — spiritual, aloof, in her white gown, in her own kingdom of retirement, yet among them bodily. All his love for her multiplied a millionfold.

"It's all right, Ursie," he cried. Then, turning to Vincent,

"You want to know where I was last night, you suspect ——"

"Softly, softly — we all do know. I expect you to tell us it was with a woman of good character, a mere visit of friendship. Isn't that so?"

"Precisely."

"And that when you found my sister was dear to

you all thoughts of this other woman became purified into . . . er . . . brotherliness? ”

“ Well? — ”

“ That earlier the affair was simply an idle amusement, an intrigue *pour passer le temps*, one of those . . . ”

“ No. ”

“ Pardon — you don’t hear me out. It was absolutely innocent? ”

“ We were not lovers criminally; nor engaged, no proposals of any sort had been made. ”

“ Imprudent man — ” said young Nuton, in his bantering tone. “ Yet you used to kiss. You were lost together at Epping, you resume midnight calls. Will you describe what you did intend? ”

In the short silence Joel heard Ursula draw in her breath sharply, and the sound somehow roused him to a mood better than fury. He had come down to Norbys to be true to her, and for her, so she should not be cheated because this was not the audience he had anticipated. His voice took on the vibrant quality that she had loved; he spoke fearlessly, his head thrown back, his eyes upon her.

“ It was tending the usual way, would have become an illegal union in time, supposing the woman’s honesty had not refused. I have asked her pardon for the attempts that hadn’t come to words; the rea-

son I was with her on Thursday so late, when you had us watched, was for settling her business accounts, advising her as to them. Yes — after I came here this pursuit was given up — that's easy to understand."

One listener's face had grown very stern.

"Did you mean to pension her off?" asked Vincent.

"Certainly not. There was no tie that . . ."

The sentence was not finished, for Ursula had risen; groped her way to the door, and opened it. Joel sprang forward, but Vincent was in the path — and shut his sister out, after whispering to her. "My dear Hunter, give her time to decide her attitude; I know what it will be, but she shall not be harried by anybody. Don't imagine that my father and I judge you as men of the world; I especially, having made feeble psychological studies, am never astounded by the chivalries that modern mortals exhibit. Having gained Ursula's affection you ceased to desire a mistress. Possibly your kindness to the poor soul became as sexless as the attachments we are told await us aloft. But as for wisdom — there you failed lamentably. Lucky for you that your smirched private reputation doesn't do you the least hurt here."

"I don't understand . . ." faltered Joel, his head swimming.

"Ursie based her faith on your truth, not your morality. You seem to have given her to believe . . ."

"I lied to her," broke out Joel, fiercely — "yes, I know. I have come down to make that right — to get forgiven."

Vincent came over the thick carpet, laid his hand on Joel's for a second.

"I honour that. But it won't answer."

"I'm not smart at definitions. Afterwards, if you wish, I'll try to make you understand, but now it's Ursie's claim. . . . Will you ask her to see me? Or, if she's in the sanctum I'll go straight to her."

Vincent moved swiftly,

"I will ascertain her views."

Joel did not try to stir old Mr. Nuton into speech, stood awaiting Vincent's return, then strode past him, down the corridors, into the room with the flower-niches, and the bare classic look of peace. Ursula held him off, with her hand touching his chest.

"There was no other woman in the place you fill, in the love that is yours for all time. I was thinking that, when the girl I had wanted as human

comfort and toy, pleasure in a gray life, was going down the road. I saw her as we spoke. There was all the contrast. It was a lie, and no lie. Ursie, it only matters because you can't see."

How maddeningly proud the beautiful mouth was, how erect the brown head.

"Yes. You were to be my eyes.— You will never know what I've lost — not if you could live three lives in one. You have put out my eyes again. A vulgar story, proving you ordinary man, . . . wouldn't have separated us. . . . God knows I could forget. . . . But I don't trust you now.— Will you help me by . . . by going away?"

She was shaking, as a young strong tree shakes in a storm. Her shoulders, arms, wrists, and fingers all quivered.

"It was a vulgar, immoral tale — that's just it, dearest. The lowest craving of passion."

"I groped for your soul, and you showed me one that wasn't yours at all. Perhaps I should have loved the soul more having to look over its stain? — Surely a woman might? — But I must rely on my own blind sight for the future."

"Ursie, don't you believe me — about Thursday, and other times?"

"No."

"Nor in my love for you?"

"Why *should* a man want a blind wife?"

Madame's question, that she had repeated to him in fun, that meant so much beyond the actual words.

"You think I have been deceiving you all along? . . . You *can't*. . . Haven't we cared too powerfully?"

"There is no faith left. Possibly the darkness I have round me, the pain of always listening, kills compassion . . . I am selfish. . . . You have been cruel — as God wasn't. He took away my eyes, it is true, but He had some great motive. You put them out, with tortures — insults that will ache."

He would have thrown his arms around her, but, with released hands, she thrust him back.

"You go on torturing, every instant that you stay. . . . Won't you at least take your dismissal?"

"It is too small a fault to . . ."

"Do you think I want a husband who may have married me for my money, who had a mistress, but put her aside, for that, who taught me what love is, and calculated just how much he could express by voice, how much he could hide of himself — the real self — all the while? Could I be sure if even a sunset was red or grey? Have you only lied to me twice? . . . I think it has been many times."

There was the fable of Gwendolen's happiness, the

devotedness of Bob. Even now Joel could not believe that his romance was past.

"I . . . I must go if you command. But be merciful. Let me see you again very soon — tomorrow?"

"Never."

"Ursie — you can't toss away a bond like ours. . . . We belong."

"I am not the first girl who has been in love with a dream."

"Let me wait — atone, regain your trust."

"A drunkard, a profligate, might reform — I can't watch a liar become true."

"I will write. . . . You must be less hard soon."

"Dina shall not read your letters — nor shall Harriet."

She had gone back several paces, stood, tall, stately, with a severe mouth, by that western window which was blushing on every pane with the glory of setting sun.

"Go," she said, wearily. "You aren't hurt much, you know. It has all been such a sham on your part."

CHAPTER XXVII

AFTERWARDS

DIRECTLY Joel had gone away Vincent sought his sister, who was sitting, inactive, in her sanctum.

"Are you fairly all right, dear?"

There were no signs of emotion.

"Quite. Being blind, I mistook black for white. You were all wise—I was wild. Have you told Dina for me? . . . Ah, thank you, Vin."

While she passed into Madame's room young Nuton stood gazing over the park towards the station, caressing his moustache.

"Poor dear devil!" he muttered, and lit a cigarette.

Meanwhile Dina was bestowing a peck of a kiss on Ursula's face, which she had taken between two plump hands. The girl was saying,

"We won't discuss Joel, please, nor my mistaken vanity. Give me plenty to do—and oh, tell me, are *you* quite true? You wouldn't lie to me, not about anything conceivable?"

"Have I ever?"

"No, but could you? To spare my feelings?"

To help Steve's career? To earn him honour? To hide his wickednesses, if he has any?"

"No, chick, no."

It was a passion of wounded, snarling pride that shook Ursula, lying on the outside of her bed for hours that night: the other passion, strong too, was overpowered, left to wait its turn. Gradually, as days passed, she realised all that the idyll of loving her "rough man" had meant to her, that he would never hold her by his strong hands, pulling her up the hills they both half worshipped, talking in the brusque speech she had thought so honest, never lead her into the woman's kingdom. She was to be alone always, neither wife nor mother. She was blinder than before: eye-places, heart, brain, and soul, were all in agony. Surely her burnt-out eyes did pain? — She pressed her fingers to them. Joel had kissed the scars, had not seemed shocked or revolted.

He had been willing to pay the price.

"It's horrible how I want you here," she told him. "It shames me. I was so serenely in love: there struck me as something primeval, plain, majestic, about you. And half of me will always want you now. I can't deny that, not to myself."

All the days she worked, conversed, laughed, ate

and drank, played the piano brilliantly. All the nights found her battling as before.

At last, one dawn, she slipped on to her knees and felt the shape of the Figure on the great crucifix upon the wall.

"Christ help me!" she petitioned. "You know everything. We're taught that You experienced every sorrow and pain."

The little singing creatures of the morning as they woke to their orisons seemed to teach her resignation. It was a quieted girl who crept back to bed and thought how myriads of women love, and are deceived, accept their crosses, are blind too, more or less. She understood that sorrow has its mysterious purpose, that no person can ever see quite clearly here on earth.

Joel had gone straight home after leaving her. In the train he had fought his anger and conquered it, then tried, with scant success, to realise that Ursula was no more to him than a memory.

Ellen Road smelt of fried fish, a baby at No. 6 was yelling, cats prowled among the laurels of front gardens then scuttered across the pavement, lithe bodies of black. No. 10 was decorously silent, the milk-can out for the morning, the knocker very bright. He stole in, then paused by mother's door,

and gave the soft whistle by which he summoned her at night if he had burnt all his candles, or had forgotten to say he must have breakfast earlier.

"Yes, darling," came a sleepy response. He was leaning over the bed before she could begin to be anxious — "*Back, Bear?* . . . Oh, you're wretched about something! What have they done to you?"

The thin figure was bolt upright now, so he sat down beside it and put his arms round the shoulders. Seeing her without the nice mount of fairish gray hair always distressed him, felt somehow insulting to her though he loved her more for the dilapidations of the years.

"It's my own fault, Ursula has set me away because she has lost faith in me. I deceived her about . . . about something."

The bony little hands clung hard to his neck, a blush that smarted suffused the old face. It was that mark of how his sinfulness told on her that broke up his reserve of independence, the think-of-me-as-you-choose indignation that had prevented his relieving her mind earlier.

"Yes, it's about Patty Dewey, but, as God hears us, she hasn't ever been mine. Ursie doesn't believe me when I say so, but you will."

Was she wicked for the spasm of triumph the words caused?

It was such an apotheosis of motherhood. Kissing him, on lips, chin, and cheeks, she burst out with,

“Oh, my own boy, then it will all come right in the end!”

“She’s blind, that is at the root of the whole affair. If you couldn’t look in my eyes — hadn’t ever — mightn’t you doubt a bit? Proof has been given her, so she thinks. Evidence that is awful dark.”

“You’ll be reinstated. . . . There’s a Just God.”

“I won’t base expectations on that, I’m not fit. It is a prodigal who has come home, little ma; you must go on praying for him to be washed white again, for he wanted Patty once upon a time, he meant to take her. Only you see Patty is a good woman.”

“With all those wild blue things in her hat?”

“Feathers don’t make a girl immoral.— There, there, don’t shake so. I have heard you say so often that there’s pardon. You’ve got to rejoice over me, with those angels you resemble. . . . I’m glad there’s only a night light, dearest. We must be our usual selves to-morrow: that’ll help me best, you know.”

After dozens of tender phrases had dropped from her lips he wisely prescribed a sleeping tabloid, then sat by the bed, talking in a monotonous voice about the days when she was his schoolboy confidant, when

Clara was not allowed to interrupt their tête-à-tête, told her she had always been the kindest, finest mother in the inhabited realms, that, for the future he would want her more than ever. When the drug did its work he stole from the room, went upstairs to stand, till morning was advanced, resting an arm on the strip of mantelpiece, communing with Ursula's portrait, a rigid man, his teeth set hard.

Patience Hunter found a scribble from him under her door. He had given her something to do for him.

"Please tell Clara; all, or as much as you like."

All? — Decidedly not. She would not let her boy down.

When his sister came in to wake her she was eloquent about the injurious suspiciousness of the Nuttons, the innocence of Joel's kindness to Patty Dewey.

"We have been very consorious — at least I have. I do not know if that ignorant yet culpable woman, Mrs. Judd, has tried to set your mind against our Joel. . . . You mustn't appear to pity him, he has so much pride, but you *had* to be told, he wished that."

"Stop!" cried Clara, bounding from the trunk on which she had perched. "I shall just clear out. Say I've gone to a distant place of worship. If

there's one thing I can't stand it's miseries that aren't to be howled over."

Secretly Clara felt that Ursula had only vindicated the cause of woman, and thought her brother clever to have settled mother's opinion so completely, yet she inwardly raged against all the Nutons.

Plainly it was no use trusting any man. Marry one of the crew? — Ugh, no! — Still one could stick up for a brother and be his pal. The role he had adopted for his mother's sake was his best support, for each minute in her presence he had to sham calm, so was able to banish from memory the vision of the girl in white who had looked saint-like, ethereal, un-kissable, in the library at Norbys. In her sanctum, calling him her torturer, she had grown too strange to be clearly recollected. Another Ursie had stood there.

Feeding, helping wash-up, dressing for church, walking out, setting the good example to Ellen Road denizens that partly compensated mother for the chagrins of the week, listening to hymns and prayers with forced attention, catching himself up when the sermon set him dreaming, bringing little ma home, with her heart tranquillized marvellously, playing the piano while she prepared dinner, left him with so many hours consumed.

At the meal Clara burst into conversation without

any greeting to him. Could he do a sum for her? If fifty holiday children were boarded out in seven homes, and three temporary parents were willing to take three each at a reduction of sixpence from the usual five shillings a brat, what would the bill be?

Directly he could escape he walked to Hampstead, and beyond. Out in a dusty browned field, lying against a bank, invisible from the lane, he took his loss out again and studied it — then the greater grief — Ursie's unhappiness. Joel was no coxcomb, but he knew what he had been to her. Another lover, years ago, had abandoned her because of her burnt eyes; this one had deceived her because she was blind.

Mother was not there; he lay gripping suburban soil. Life without Ursie had to be faced; there was the degradation of being sent back to his proper set, the remembrance of the Nuton men's polished pity, the knowledge that they, Gwendolen, Madame, Ursie too, thought him the fortune hunter, unmasked and dismissed; still, it was the injury to her that mattered most. That beloved body, with sightless face! No man would cherish, no child belong to it. She would grow slowly old, bearing her burden.

Religion had become dim for him of late years, though a conviction of its real force glimmered behind the blackness. He could speak glibly about the prayers of a parent washing a soul white, by God's

willing response, he probably believed, but he could not pray himself for Ursula. His manhood had done the evil: it would feel like trying to shelve his own load, he imagined, if he asked her Maker to remedy his crime against her.

He was a fighter. He had no enemy but himself.

With time Ursie might relent sufficiently to read his letter: he would send one a month, and take the chance. The immediate duty was to lessen the blow to the mother who loved him.

He took her to a city church where there was a special musical evening service, gave her supper at a restaurant, kept her occupied in thought by his talk as they came home. A difficult half hour was when she came to sit in his arm-chair to say good-night; he had spread his desk with new sheets of paper, persuaded her to help him tidy a drawer, showed off the page numbered for the sketching out of chapters for his next novel.

She was sincerely puzzled. People did say that authors went nearly mad about their profession, yet it did not strike her as "quite nice" for an engagement to be broken off and the man to be deep in consideration at once of fictional courtships. Of course if her boy could take comfort so, why, she must be thankful.

"Joel darling," she suggested, timidly, "will you be *able* to fix your thoughts?"

"A business man gets into that practice."

"So he must. It would never do for Mr. Leadley's accounts to be all muddled. How brave you are! I couldn't. And the other story hasn't come back."

"Not yet."

"Tell me again what it's to be about?"

"A derelict sort of chap, who has a perfect girl's love and loses it through being unworthy. She will get recompensed quickly — she must — I couldn't let her suffer long. Some splendid chap . . ."

"But she couldn't be consoled by another if she had really loved the first."

Joel plunged his head into the cupboard under the writing table, rummaged among scribbled papers for some minutes before he replied, brusquely —

"She's too sensible to keep on lamenting a lucky loss. . . . But it isn't the girl I want to have much to do with — all the book will be about the degeneration, and smashing of the brute. I shall write it fast, not deliberately as the last was done, try what white heat will do."

"Won't it be a too miserable story?"

"Tragic. Lots of publishers like that type. It makes more stir, too."

“Well — write hard, dear.”

“Every spare minute — except for our walks, and jaunts.”

“Going to that service to-night was lovely — and to have my best darling praying beside me. . . . But, Joel, don’t be shocked — I’ve never owned it to anyone before. . . .”

With a smile that seemed bright he came and hugged her, leading her to the door.

“What is it, motherkin? — let it out before you go off to bed — and to sleep, mind.”

She stroked his face.

“I never feel so near to God as on the top of Primrose Hill. Many a night, after supper when you and Clara were busy, I’ve stolen off there to get my worries quieted. At my age it’s safe and respectable. There’s a vast peace that comes — the world seems all at one’s feet.”

“Does it? To be trampled on, not won, I suppose? We will try the spell together. Just sit, hand in hand, silent, on a bench, drinking it all in.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

LETTERS

A MONTH later, when hot August was gone and September cooling, Vincent, wearing his most cynical smile, went to Ursula's sanctum.

"Resting, my dear?"

"Lazing. I couldn't force myself to do any more to-day. It is all so futile."

"The grand Agricultural Settlement?"

"Yes."

"Who can say?—I regret bringing you unpleasant news. Drury told me in town yesterday that his beloved has no guests at all in his absence, and I am received on my return by old Camp, whose daughter Nell is housemaid at 'The Height,' Gray-shot, with the information that Madame's son has stolen his best chum's woman."

Ursula sank her face in her hands.

"Oh, my poor Dina! So she is blind too? Isn't there any chance that the facts are overstated?"

"None at all. Nell knows. She is a decent young woman, the 'goings-on' have so troubled her conscience that she had to tell someone.—Well, I'll

over to Cambridge to-night, and bully the boy."

"Another proof," cried Ursula, raising herself wearily; "they come in shoals. We are slaving, Dina and I, with Lord Drury and all the rest of the zealous, in an insane attempt to benefit men, women, and children by taking away their hardships. For the little ones the attempt isn't so ridiculous perhaps as for the adults. I'm learning to hate work that is only for the bodies of fellow souls."

"You want Madame spared this blow?"

"It would break her heart. She has no suspicion that Stephen is vile and greedy. He *has* left off gambling — perhaps we can cure him of vice. Think how she has made his career her idol.— Oh, don't laugh, Vin; it may be weak to idolise, but the women who can are so fortunate that they shouldn't be robbed."

Vincent rose from the settee where he had been lolling.

"I will do my utmost. I can threaten to tell Drury. These handsome-ugly youngsters play the dickens with domestic arrangements. You're alone to-day, Ursie, so I told Billie to call for you with his new car."

"I shall not be a lively companion."

"A pardoned offender is bound to find the society of his pardoner soothing if she is kind."

That evening a message reached the girl out of the past. It was a letter from Mrs. Hunter, and Harriet had to read it.

“10, Ellen Road,

“London, N.W.,

“*September 25.*

“DEAR MISS NUTON,

“I am writing to tell you how grieved I am to have heard nothing of you. Perhaps it was not to be expected that I should, but we are all anxious lest you may be ill, as the hot summer has caused doctors to be very busy. If you would not mind letting me have just a line, I should be grateful. Nobody knows I am addressing you. There is so much I ought to say, but you will understand that I cannot, and I do not fear you will misunderstand a mother's feelings, or suppose that being a mother makes one prejudiced. I could not resist telling you that my son's book is accepted. The news came last night, and was received like a blow. It may mean fame and fortune, but he would so much rather have had an answer to one of the two letters he has sent you.

“The service he takes me to often on Sunday evenings is so beautiful that I close my eyes — and wish you were near us listening. We are all in need

of our Redeemer, the best and the worst, and the in between.

"Surely, dear Miss Nuton, we must beware how we judge others to be worse than they have confessed themselves to be? The hymn I liked best of all had this verse in:

"Love is kind, and suffers long,
Love is meek, and thinks no wrong,
Love than death itself more strong,
Therefore give us love."

"We have no secrets at home now — only not just everything told to Clara. You have made a mistake, dearest.

"Say an 'Our Father' sometimes for this old woman who took such a fancy to you. Indeed who could help it? I cannot be vexed, my heart aches too sorely for the blindness. I used to think being rich must be so grand; now I see how terrible a risk it is. In my book, dear, that I promised to lend you, there is a noble passage about the absolute necessity of all true disciples to live in peace with one another, and to forgive one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven them.

"Do write to me, dear Miss Nuton.

"With love,

"Yours very sincerely,

"MARTHA HUNTER."

So Joel had written? — Ursula knew that Dina must have confiscated his letters, laid them aside unopened, no doubt. A blind girl has no protection from her friends.

Madame returned from Cambridge with tidings of Stephen's triumphs all round, as student, lecturer, money collector, and chum.

"David and Goliath — no, that wasn't the name, Jonathan, wasn't it? — poor Lord Drury would do anything for the boy, in gratitude for having found so able a forwarder of his benevolent scheme. It's a marvel Steve's head isn't turned. Such eloquence in the Town Hall the other night, I'm told — such a popular lad socially. If only I could be certain that his father isn't sleeping, but knows!"

Ursula did not ask about Joel's letters. She had told Dina she should destroy them unread if any came, so to quarrel with her because they had not been announced seemed useless.

Next evening Vincent told her the scamp had wept, on being remonstrated with, and, after vowing he could not give up the woman who was more to him than life itself, had promised not to go near her again for a year.

"Another star will have arisen ere half the months have elapsed," said Vin. "Never make de-

cisions hard for the young and fiery, temporise;—so are colossal cures wrought.”

Ursula had a type writer in her bedroom: she sat up late trying to answer Mrs. Hunter, tore reply after reply, finally produced a short, non-committal epistle. It was kind, that was all that could be said for it. The mother was congratulated on the acceptance of the son's novel, otherwise his existence was not noticed.

Weeks glided one after another till the browns of October had given place to late fiery reds and ochres on the creeper about the towers of the old house and the trees of the shrubberies and forest: chrysanthemums flamed in the open beds, or hung, damp—soddened, where they stood in shade. The clinging mists that alternated with brilliant sunny hours of early November seemed to suit Ursula's mood: she felt the tears of Nature in the atmosphere and upon herbage, knew that the sad dying season was at hand for flowers, but for leaves the passing that is essential to the spring renewing. She tried to work extra hard, though still without enthusiasm. Dina reproved her for lack of zeal.

Then, one morning, Harriet brought, with the tea-tray, a letter from Joel.

“Mr. Hunter sent this to me, Miss, with the request that I would put it into your own hands.”

The elderly maid lingered a second, then, not being asked to read aloud, left the bedroom.

An hour after Ursula was being driven into Grayshot that a lawyer she did not know might give her the text of this piece of correspondence.

“ 10, Ellen Road,
“ London, N.W.

“ DEAR MISS NUTON,

“ My former letters were confessions and appeals, reiterating exactly all I told you by word. This shall ask for your friendship. Let me keep just that in my life, if you can. If you give me leave I will write in Braille, which I have learnt.

“ Yours very sincerely,
“ JOEL HUNTER.”

Ursula thanked the lawyer, and came home full of doubt. She wanted to hear from Joel again, she dreaded giving way to the longing. Days passed, and, as he was without an answer, he began to accept silence as her verdict.

The second novel was nearly finished; sheets of it had been scribbled daily, for the composition had been easy, a kind of cursing of self. The first book was out, and already well reviewed, but he would not send it to her.—Mother was proud, yet dissatisfied.

“ Joel, dearest, do let your third book be about

a nice hero, some one resembling . . . well, the Heir of Redcliffe," she suggested.

"There mayn't ever be another book. I feel played out, little ma.'

Sitting on the arm of his chair, like a girl, she put her arms about his neck and kissed his beloved brown head of thick hair, tears dropping on it, her gentle hands smoothing parts he had rumped up in the stress of composition.

"Bear, what a terrible misfortune it will be if you grow like those men you draw so cleverly. You're always poring over nasty traits till I get anxious. And it isn't quite nice of you never to go near poor Miss Dewey. . . . I met her on Primrose Hill just now. I wouldn't have come interrupting the book if I hadn't a real adventure to relate."

"You talked?"

"Yes, quite a long time. It came over me all at once that I was meant to, that holding back wasn't Christian."

"But how did you break the ice?" he asked, being aware that Mother was both shy, and 'prickly,' afraid of ever making overtures to strangers, that Patty must have tossed her chin in the air in expectation of being snubbed.

"You see I know now that she's good. Besides she loves my boy. That's a pity, of course, yet I

must own the thought softened me wonderfully. And her new winter coat and skirt, neat navy cloth, helped too. I tried not to notice the orange bird-of-paradise in the toque. . . . Oh, boy, she *was* so astonished when I said, 'How do you do? You are my son's friend, I think?' And she answered back at once, hurt-like, 'Friend? Well, he's a queer one never to come near.' Then it struck her you might be ill and that was why I was speaking. She got her eyes all moist, and seized hold of me. We soon got cordial after that."

"Yes, I have been rather a brute, especially as she hasn't any one else to advise her about things. I'll go round now. What did you chat over?"

"Just the book and the weather, and Primrose Hill being the best walk near, so peaceful under the stars — shooting ones to-night. She has a nice voice, darling; we did mention about Ursula — she asked me when the engagement was to be announced, so I thought I ought to tell her it. . . . Oh, I can't avoid hurting you."

"Nonsense, Tender-heart; facts are facts and must be met openly. Have you any more you want to repeat?"

"No — we just compared notes about what we think of you. I've been a hateful, uncharitable creature."

The revellers at the Victory Inn were trooping out as he reached the yard entrance, so he escaped acquaintances by turning down there and so through the garden gate to the passage by the office window. The blind was down, but a tap on the door brought the landlady at once.

“Joel — you at last! . . . Sakes’ alive, how you’ve aged! — it’s not unbecoming, but the boyishness has gone. I won’t gabble about things that you’d mind, not after saying I am sorry — yes, really and truly.”

Sitting beside her on the rep couch, with her plump hand on his knee, while the left hand plied a lace-edged and scented wisp of cambric to her comely cheeks, was not very painful after all. She was such a splendid sort. His misfortune was not being rejoiced in as her possible gain.

“Let me add to the explanation you’ve heard,” he said, in a low voice. “I was completely to blame.”

“Mrs. Hunter said you were misjudged. And after wanting to marry a girl though she’s blind!”

“Don’t you see, you sympathetic person, that . . .”

His speech ended abruptly.

“Yes, I understand: that’s you, Joel, all over. Lor’, you’re a father born. Helping the toddlers, walking about dandling the babes, would be just bliss

to you. . . . My dear, my dear. . . . I'm not going to be sentimental over you myself — not foolishly — so don't sheer off; I know I'm not to be more than a pal, but you'll find me always that. I'd put it right for you if I could. What did her brother think he'd found out against you?"

"He prosecuted enquiries . . . in the city."

"Only there?"

His hesitation told her all she dreaded to know.

"It was *me!*" she cried.

"Look here, you mustn't leap to conclusions: it was a complex muddle. In one affair I lied. That clinched the matter. If you hadn't been born, dear, a lie would have lost me my position.— Leave the subject; the sore place has had enough probing. Tell me about trade."

His women folk all did what they could. Mother cooked assiduously to tempt his appetite; Clara played the Sonata Appassionata every evening she was at home; if he looked "inspired" supper was carried up to the attic on a tray, with a vase of flowers in the middle; a man was had in to mend the Venetian blinds next time they went wrong; Patience Hunter checked her tongue a dozen occasions in an evening when longing to give a graphic account of the Jinks family's last misdemeanour.

To the grave plodding writer the days and weeks were all alike, crushing his last hopes of being forgiven, taunting him with keener and keener recollections of his girl's sweetness, plunging him into deeper self-loathing.

To his surprise he received a note from Mrs. Langham, who had taken amused interest in him at Norbys. She had heard of work he might care to undertake for a paper, so invited him to tea in Powis Square. From her he learnt about Billie Heviot's return, and all it was supposed to imply.

Joel did not do a stroke of work that night, though mother laboriously prevented Mrs. Judd's voice from ringing through the house, rushed out indignantly to send away a barrel organ, and forbore from telling him that the Jinkses were giving a party — must be — for Ada had on a pink dress with a low neck — too low — and a youth with a banjo had gone up the steps.

When Joel did receive a reply to his letter he showed it to his mother.

“Norbys Priory.

“*November 20th.*

“I have been in doubt how I could answer. Yes, write to me two or three times a year, if it is the

least help. I think myself it will make us both unhappy, and can do no service that will compensate for the harm.

"Believe me I am glad that your book is already a success.

"With love to dear Mrs. Hunter,

"Sincerely yours,

"URSULA NUTON."

"Joel, Joel, she couldn't bear to put 'Dear Mr. Hunter,'—that is a famous sign!"

He sprang up, and held his would-be consoler to his heart, but he did not share her optimism.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BEST PLEADER

'A GREAT conspiracy was formulated on the top of Primrose Hill next night. Miss Dewey and Mrs. Hunter met by appointment and decided to go to Ursula together. Mother felt that she could not, and would not, sit down tamely and let Ursula consent to marry Billie Heviot to please the Nutons.

At first Patience had meant to go alone to Norbys; then she had realised that the presence of Patty would do good: the blind girl would not see the orange bird-of-paradise, but would hear only the pathetically indignant voice protesting that not only Joel, but a sister woman, had been maligned.

Patty had a nice voice; her emphatic utterances somehow carried conviction. Long before the sitting broke up on Primrose Hill Mrs. Hunter was calling her companion "my dear," and had persuaded her to wear the navy coat and skirt, and "nothing showy."

Mother's other preparations were various — putting thinner socks in her best boots that were too tight for comfort, an anxious half hour with Bradshaw, pencil, and paper, the purchase of certain

penny papers that she might sign coupons entitling her children to large sums if she should be killed on the line, the seeing that there was plenty of food in the house, the engaging of Mrs. Judd to come tomorrow to superintend Dorothy's work, or rather to make sure that No. 10 was not left, nor men had in, during Joel and Clara's absence.

He was awfully tired looking and silent — the darling — when he came into her bedroom before breakfast, with his mouth set in its sternest lines, and his jaw somehow grown squarer. She could not meet his eyes without blushing, because she was deceiving him so egregiously, yet a hope was buoying her up that when she returned to-night she would bring him comfort. Once in the train other trepidations overtook her. Suppose they could not get into the Priory, or that Vincent Nuton contrived to be with Ursula during the interview?

"I shan't be able to speak one word I've prepared, in front of the brother," she told Patty. "You haven't seen him, or you'd know why. It isn't that I think them too grand folk — didn't we all spring from Adam? — but it's his manner, for all the world as if the earth was to be burnt up next minute, and high-class persons have to seem unconcerned, and chat about plays and politics as a proof they can't be put out by anything."

"I've met plenty of the sort. One has to look at them knowingly, to make them feel they're seen through, then they gets natural."

The sight of the country where her boy had spent blissful times, of the park, and gardens, and the venerable grey house rising from woods, gave Mrs. Hunter lumps in her throat.

It was to the west entrance, Ursula's own, that they walked, leaving their cab among the bushes and trees of the side avenue.

"Patty — I beg pardon, Miss Dewey. . . ."

"No, stick to the other — we've a common feeling, in a sense."

"Well, Patty then — I'm sure I'm willing — doesn't it seem terrible to have to cross all that open part by the lawn?"

"Paths were made for walking on. Keep your head up; and remember they may be 'county,' but they've treated our Joel shameful."

The huge swinging bell clanged, a footman appeared as though by magic, but no difficulty seemed to threaten the plot; they were ushered into a pretty room that communicated with another, into which the servant vanished and mentioned their names.

"She's there! — Oh, if only the brother is out shooting something," whispered the agitated elder.

"Come this way, please."

Ursula was alone, came to greet her visitors, feeling the edge of the long table as she moved; her face was pale, but her smile ready.

"Oh, you darling. Now I see you I know you couldn't do it! Marriage is a kind of sacrament or it's nothing; don't let them force their worldly ideas upon you — poor dear innocent. There, there, I can't help crying a little; — talk to Miss Dewey while I get over seeing you. She has come to tell you it's all a wicked lie. You *can't* disbelieve a sister woman's word."

Ursula, with one arm round Mrs. Hunter, held out her right hand to Patty.

"I am glad if . . . if it is any satisfaction for you to come to protest against what has been said. But that was not why Joel and I parted. It was his own fault."

Patty wanted to be fierce, but in the blind girl's room, staring at her unperceived, this was not easy. With an abrupt little laugh she answered smartly.

"What's love for if it isn't to pardon faults now and then? I wouldn't give much for the sort that can't. Haven't you got any?"

"Many — but I am sincere."

"You won't keep the quarrel up when you understand how Miss Dewey has been insulted — I'll

leave you a little while, and just go and wait in that lovely ante-room."

Slipping out, and closing the door, Patience sat down and panted; the situation would be less painful for Patty without a third person in it, and surely, surely, Joel would be cleared from the one accusation that must be at the root of the trouble. A woman forgives a lie, mother could not help fancying, as simply as a child forgives being told the dentist will only look at a tooth that is instantaneously dragged out. But it was a nervous waiter who was rejoined by Patty, and bidden,

"Go in and see what you can manage — it isn't me she minds."

Inspired by maternal courage Patience went swiftly over to the girl, pulled her down beside her on a queer shaped seat by the fire, and began to pour out talk.

"Oh, my poor afflicted darling, you mustn't take the second-best man, that's how misery always comes. Haven't you noticed that in stories? — and it's true to life. Joel is breaking his heart for you, and more for having failed you — that's the worst sting, he tells me so, he was so proud to be yours, and he sinned against you, though not in the bad way you imagined. Forgive him, men are so weak. . . . Of

course so are we; and if God didn't pretend to believe in us where *should* we be? It doesn't do to expect any man to be perfect — Joel's father, one in a hundred, was overbearing, though I'd contradict that if anyone else dared say so. . . . One loves better after one pardons. Even if you aren't quite mollified at once the years will bring you closer; — it'll be something to have his socks to darn, clothes to air, bed to shake and turn, litter to clear up, favourite puddings to . . . Ah, I'm forgetting, you're differently circumstanced. . . . Well, there'll be his grip warm on your arm, the throb in his throat when he loves you more than words will say. You're rich, my dear, but you're a poor lonely body all the same."

Ursie leant her young cheek against the wrinkled thin one, and four hands clasped in Mrs. Hunter's lap.

"Yes, I am very solitary, and shut up in the dark. But I have no more faith in your son."

"He is so penitent — more than he need be. It wasn't a disreputable tale he kept back from you, only one he feared you wouldn't believe rightly. And when he spoke Patty was outside, going down the road, with flaunting sort of clothes on, and a walk that doesn't look decent, it's so . . . so cheeky — if I may use the word. . . . You couldn't have looked out too, but the contrast smote him. 'Did I love

that woman?' he had been asking himself.— No — a million times no, there was passion perhaps — but not love. And that passion was before he saw you, my beautiful sweet."

"I could have forgiven the sin, if it had happened, and he had confessed it. I can't place reliance on his word."

"Yet he is true to the core. He was coming to own to the lie, when your brother sent for him."

"*Was* he?"

"You're unjust. How dared you taunt him with not wanting the blind wife, only her money? God knows he would be thankful to take you without a penny. Don't you know that now?"

"No, dear. I am deceived by all who come near me."

The old figure stiffened, but hurt dignity could not keep a choke out of the quavering voice that asked,

"Am *I* a liar, Miss Nuton?"

"Parents do sometimes deceive to save their children pain."

There was a silence. Patience was praying. Then she said, with a tiny sob,

"I know I'm a wicked woman. I gave up the Society of Friends for my dear husband's sake, and I've never been at home in the Church, though the

musical services are beautiful and the hymns go straight through one. Still, I'm not as insincere as all that. Haven't I called my Joel a . . . a . . . No, I *can't* use the Bible term, it won't come out, but you know what I mean. He meant to fall, therefore he *did* fall, in the sight of Heaven. I've not excused him. All I say is he's true, and sorry. If you've a Testament handy I'll swear so. And it's your bounden duty to forgive."

"Marriage is not philanthropy. One has to be able to trust."

Ursula felt that Joel was somehow being brought nearer.

"And what is faith but determining to believe? He will never give you a syllable but the loveliest. He will let you look into his soul of souls. . . . You can make his children grow up truthful."

It was Ursie's turn to be silent; mother feared she had gone too far, so tried another argument.

"See how Joel himself needs you. . . . You can cure his faults, nobody else could. Such a villain he has been making himself out in his new book, and he the best and dearest really. There's nothing too bad for him to think of his own character now, since he failed you. Some day you will be asked if you couldn't have raised, as well as consoled, the man you loved. It's always the way, we're selfish — want-

ing to be satisfied ourselves, instead of wanting to give. That's how women, who were meant for the contrary, turn themselves into beautiful curses, the crueller the more beautiful. I don't mind whether it's finery or pride that gets worshipped. One girl defrauds her man if she won't marry him till he's made a fortune to spend on fal-lals, another cheats her lover because she can't be proud of his whole character. . . . God manages to be proud of us."

"God is not blind."

"You'll feel my Joel's sincerity every time his hand lies on yours, hear it in each love word he speaks."

"Oh, mother . . . mother!"

"Why not just be human, darling, and own you want him? Spirits are all very grand and lofty, but we're bodies too. You won't make joy for yourself, poor lamb, by refusing to be wife for want of a flawless husband."

Patience had exhausted even her eloquence in son defence, and Ursula was not vanquished. "There — I've done my weak best!"

"I wish I could believe in him — but the lie still stands between us."

"Then I'll hurry back by the next train."

"No, no, you must stay the night."

"Never! Not where Joel is ill-treated — with a

girl who means to take another lover, one she doesn't really care for."

"If ever I can forgive — thoroughly — I will. The impossibility at present is a fault I can't help. . . . You can tell Joel I will not marry anybody else.— Now will you stay, mother?"

"Best not, dearie. There's Patty too; we should both be so uncomfortable, having to meet your brother and all. Besides, I'll take my boy the meagre scrap of comfort. Failure must be due to me, I fear; if I'd stayed loyal to God He would have put eloquence into my mouth."

Ursula still nestled her cheek against the agitated face.

"No one can give faith to another — neither in God, nor man."

Patience reflected on this truism, her tears dropping fast till a practical programme was arranged.

"Prayers can," she said. "I'll get up a quarter of an hour earlier every morning, so as to have more time: and penance helps — my new bonnet shall just stay in its box, no matter how shabby the Jinkses call me."

CHAPTER XXX

THE TOUCH OF NATURE

GWENDOLEN was disappointed in her sister, who refused to take advice.

"It's nonsense to be frettin' without tears for a young man who was impossible as a Nuton connection," she remarked, on Christmas Eve. "Now if you'd selected the Abbervalley carpenter, or the shock-headed musical farm lad, we might have astounded our world with them, they'd have been so picturesque. A Radical ironmonger's clerk hasn't any points. Effect can't be wrung out of some persons."

"You can't understand, you who are so happy with your Bob."

"Look here, Ursa — I'll own up, as an object lesson. If ever bride loathed her lot I loathed mine. But now I wouldn't exchange my young fool for romance. He's fallen in love with his wife, so if I fail to run him brilliantly, an' hold him too, it'll be my own miss. Why, the Flower Girls' Home of Rest's going to be the talk of next season."

Gwen complained to Vincent.

"Our Ursie's sinking down into a dreary dreamer. It's most annoyin' after she seemed to be gettin' so easily over sendin' him packin'."

The brother pointed melodramatically to the bust of Marie Antoinette.

"You women all prepare your tragedies, for passion, or for pride."

"We veer, I admit. Havin' sampled matrimony without affection I'd give the infant her rough diamond now, if I could, but between us we've smashed him up too ignominiously."

"Nay, 'twas the gods who actually intervened. We should have failed but for the excellent Quaker's white lie."

Patience Hunter's embassy had brought Joel the minor consolation of knowing that Ursula was not to marry Billie Heviot, yet sometimes he almost wished that she could find forgetfulness in new ties. Unless she some day vouchsafed him an almost miraculous forgiveness for insincerity — surely the unpardonable crime? — she must remain alone, and sightless.

His mother, who watched him anxiously, would burst out with words that hurt them both and had to be apologised for.

"To think that you ought to be out of this squalid street, surrounded by gold plate, Rubenses and Gains-

boroughs and real Turkey carpets! I know they don't matter to you, it's only the poor misguided girl who does, but you *ought* to have them all, Bear — and horses and motor-cars.

"It's a wicked shame! You *are* a gentleman, Joel. I tried to train you fit for one, even when you had to wear holland overalls over your poor little best suits to save them, and did with half the pocket-money of the other boys at school — and you a genius too."

The second book was not successful. Mother was not surprised.

"You did it hurriedly, and your hero grovelled so. Just sit down and make a beautiful plot, about a girl who wouldn't trust a *true* man, and was punished till the last chapter."

"*Madre*, you shan't blame Ursula."

"Oh, Bear, dear, it may be sinful, but how can I help it? She has forgotten that we all fall many times daily, and that the Father must laugh, if He isn't too offended, when mere clods think themselves unbreakable."

Ursula was faced by further trouble in spring. Vincent brought her more news of Stephen.

"I am taking measures to capture de Vert if he invades this neighbourhood again: he was at 'The Height' last week-end, in defiance of his sober

promise not to set eyes on the siren who belongs to another."

Then some village gossip warned the Rector of the lad's infatuation, and the Rector gave hints to Madame. Dina did not let him speak out; her fury was too vigorous. She did not at once reveal the horrible suspicion to Ursula, but the confidence was given at last, out in the woods, by April's waning daylight. The girl was groping for primroses, asking about them. Madame snorted with impatience.

"Yes, there are cartloads of the yellow stuff, of course, you rhapsodical infant, but I haven't time for play. I want to tell you something atrocious."

Then the tale poured out. It was shocking that a noble lad should have such enemies, but reformers were generally stoned or crucified. She knew life — the son of such a father was exposed to ordinary temptations, but not dastardly ones; he might be capable of immorality, but treachery to a chum? — Never!

"Lord Drury's Julia! — Could a viler charge have been fabricated? But the Rector won't quickly forget the setting-down I gave him. Ugh! . . . Clerical duty, forsooth! . . . Thank the Powers I never sat under any preacher . . . Lord Drury indeed!"

"But she is a bad woman — and, dreadfully fas-

cinating," Ursula murmured. Dina turned upon her.

"Are you standing there *doubting* my lad?"

"You know I love Steve."

"Then don't appear to tremble for his vital honour. . . . Lord Drury, who got my boy to plead with her last year, with all his young eloquence, to let the union be legalised? — Lord Drury, who leans on the brave boyish championship — *he* to be duped? . . . If Steve could stoop to that I'd jump into the nearest water in despair of human nature."

Ursula only had to listen to the torrents of language till they were close upon the park gates of Norbys, when Madame broke off into a storm of choking dry sobs.

"Oh, Dina, you mustn't, dear! Where is your hope? You don't mean that you think Steve has done this?"

Clinging together, one for physical guidance, one for spiritual support, the two women climbed the last hill, began the descent on the other side, the steep winding way, where the trees of two woods hung over, making premature night.

"Isn't it weak of me? Believe it? . . . No . . . My John's boy!"

They had just come to the bridge over a waterfall, crossed it, and the noise was too great for more

words. Then there was an abrupt twist in the black lane. Suddenly Ursula caught her friend closer.

“I hear a car coming.”

It swirled down the hill at a speed only fit for a wide high road, swaying, swerved a little, but not enough. The girl was conscious that Madame turned to look but was caught, in the act of turning, dragged away — and two sharp cries followed. The car raced on.

Calling “Dina . . . Dina . . .” Ursula searched with outstretched arms over the sandy ruts and stones, but all was silent, and she could not find what she sought.

Then Camp, the old man from the lodge, came hurrying to her.

“The poor dear lady! . . . Run down by her own son too, and that woman! . . . Here, Miss Ursula, over here. . . . No, she’s not killed. There’s breath still.”

A few hours later Vincent, after enquiries at the door of the sickroom, went to his father in the library.

“Madame is bound for eternity unless a miracle intervenes.”

The old man looked perturbed for once.

“There is a chance for her life then?”

“If she battles for it. The question is, how much

does she know? Truly the frailty of human nature is prime contriver of crises. This idolised boy was making a bolt with the fair Julia: there was luggage on the car, Camp reports. Will he return to weep by the maternal bedside? If not, Ursie will be at her wits' end how to account for his not being fetched from Cambridge."

Stephen did arrive. Fear of what might have befallen his mother made him desert his divinity, in spite of her declaration that, if abandoned, the flight should never be repeated. Young Nuton worked hard to quiet his violent self-reproaches while encouraging his penitence. For Dina might ask for him at any minute.

That was the beginning of a painful week for the blind girl. Days and nights dragged by, doctors came and went, nurses alternated their guard, silence was ordered, servants crept about whispering, doors opened and closed softly, the whole house felt the thrill of the contest between unconscious life and death. Madame had been terribly cut about, had lost much blood.

"And I can't see how she looks — can't watch for the first glimmer of reason," Ursie cried wistfully.

The strain was telling upon the sightless watcher, healthy though she was, when at last the rustle of a movement on the bed told her that there was some

change. Another hour passed, nourishment had been administered, and Madame opened wide eyes.

"Chick. . . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"Steve?"

"No, not Steve."

That was Ursula's first lie. A doctor who was there had thought the son was wanted, but she had known better what the whisper asked, had understood how to make it possible for the patient to sink to sleep. She had acted solely on impulse.— Was God angry? — Are sins of the tongue sometimes not sins? — She wondered.

The next awakening brought the question more plainly.

"It wasn't Steve . . . in the car?"

"A stranger from London. . . . You mustn't see your boy yet, but he is close at hand, waiting and longing. He's been in such a way about you."

Then Ursula, by a flash of intuition, realised that God could have saved Dina without any mortal's help.

The weakness would not yield to treatment: there had been so much loss of blood. Yet Madame was content now, believed that her eyes had deceived her, that Lord Drury's Julia had been driven by a stranger, so tried to get stronger, for Steve's sake.

One afternoon Ursula, descending, appeared before her father, brother, and sister, with this imperious notification:

"I have telegraphed for Joel. The doctors both fear the worst, and I . . . I cannot bear it alone."

Vincent was positively startled into an exclamation of dismay.

"*Confound!* . . . My dear, how can your admirable character require to lean upon a . . . a . . ."

The girl was leaving the room; her white face had so much tragedy written on it that her brother was silenced.

"Meet him, Vin; treat him properly, explain the accident. . . . Tell him I will see him as soon as I can."

The summons was an amazing one to Joel. Ursie had wired:

"*Dina probably dying. Come down, please.*"

In the train he tried to subdue the exaltation at being wanted, told himself it was a mere friend who was needed to deal with some private difficulty. Yet even that would betray some trust. It was spring, the pre-eminent season of love, and lovers' aspirations. He could not repress a sense of rapture, a tumultuous, unreasonable ecstasy.

Vincent's bearing towards him was almost fra-

ternal, yet he owned to being without a notion what the summons signified.

Two doctors stayed that night: it was given out that Madame must reach some turning point. Vincent and the unwelcome guest waited up in a sitting-room near the sick chamber. At three o'clock in the morning Nuton went to fetch a book and cigars.

Joel was standing by the open window, looking across moon-lit lawns where clipped evergreens and stone statues cast weird shadows and the wind rustled moaningly between the luscious-hued peonies and shimmery white lilacs, when he heard another sound, a low call of his name in the corridor.

Hastening to the door he saw Ursula coming towards him, groping by the wall.

"Here, love," he cried, stepping forward.

An outstretched hand plunged at him, lay on the edge of the white waistcoat. He caught it in a great protective clasp, reminiscent of the first night they had encountered each other by a ballroom entrance.

She was trembling, and her cheeks were almost as pale as her white rest-gown.

"Dina is . . . better. . . . They say she is past the crisis."

"God bless her! I'm thankful, for your sake."

Ursula put a hand on each of his shoulders, and dropped her head against the collar of the common

evening suit, glad, oh, unspeakably glad, that two arms were round her while she made a confession.

"She asked me who the man was . . . so like Stephen . . . in the car. A shock would have killed her. . . . So I lied . . . Not once but many times. . . . I shall never feel clean again. Will you be able to trust my word?"

"Implicitly."

It was joy unparalleled when he felt Ursula stroking his face, tracing each feature, holding the square jaw, even kissing his lips with the sublime, dignified, unabashed tenderness he had yearned for so desperately.

"Joel, I know now. . . . You spoke unguardedly that time. . . . You never really loved Patty; it was only an attempt of passion, as you said. . . . Forgive my long, long hardness."

"I can't. There's no need."

"My falsehoods were deliberate. I'm glad I'm worse than you. . . . It's so dreadfully easy, isn't it?"

"Yes, beloved. But I'll always show you sunsets as they are."

They were close to the window. The blind girl raised her face smilingly, just as though she could see the stars.

"I hate pride!" she whispered. "Now it has slipped from me I know how I love you, and that love means faith."

THE END

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